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2008 Anime
Year In Review

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FEAR 2

Killzone 2

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Resident Evil 5

March 2009

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A simple system, a simple view

Last month's editorial ended with a veiled promise that I'd talk a bit more about Nintendo and the Wii. Nintendo is making money right now while plenty of people are not. Nintendo is selling systems and games in record numbers. Nintendo is probably filled with many smiling faces right now. Good for them, good for their success.

I don't care much to comment on Nintendo as they are today, but I think it's important to explore why some of us in the old guard miss what a Nintendo game once was. I understand why some gamers continue to be so vocally upset with a gamemaker game maker who is now more concerned with fun than deep fantasy. When I think Nintendo, I think of rich worlds, and I think of the games that define why I am still passionate about this industry.

At their very best, Nintendo understood what it's like to maintain a childlike wonderment, to create worlds that offered escape while maintaining a professional level of craft that was far from childlike. We all are looking for something specific in our games, and to me there is some

ineffable quality to a Nintendo experience that has always been absolutely right. Nintendo consistently spoke to what I most wanted out of a game, whether it was Metroid, Zelda, Mario, or any number of the rich third-party creations like Castlevania or Final Fantasy.

To list off all the Nintendo greats may seem like an obvious exercise in nostalgia, but that doesn't make their place in history meaningless, to be forgotten and replaced with open arms by games we can't even figure out how to categorize. For all the gamers concerned with achievements and scores and teaming up to kill groups of Internet clans, for all the somewhat gamers who like to cook and bowl, there are plenty left who still cherish what Nintendo once espoused—and maybe deserve to be cut a little slack when the complaining gets a little out of hand. The most passionate of emotions can come from the threat that you might lose something that was once a huge part of your life. And change ain't easy.

Nintendo has earned their success; the Wii is creating a new kind of magic for a new generation, and if a book has

"Nintendo has earned their success..."

been closed from the past, there's no reason why a new story can't be slowly written that can shape excellent opportunities for gaming to come. But next time you think the most crazed of Nintendo fans need to shut up already, do know that it comes from a place of love!

It is, after all, the season of love, but now that Valentine's Day has come and gone, let's get past this mushy crap and get to reading this issue. It's a pretty darned good month in games out there for a February. So go find your favorite system, your favorite game, your favorite virtual world to live in. And enjoy.

-Brady Fiechter

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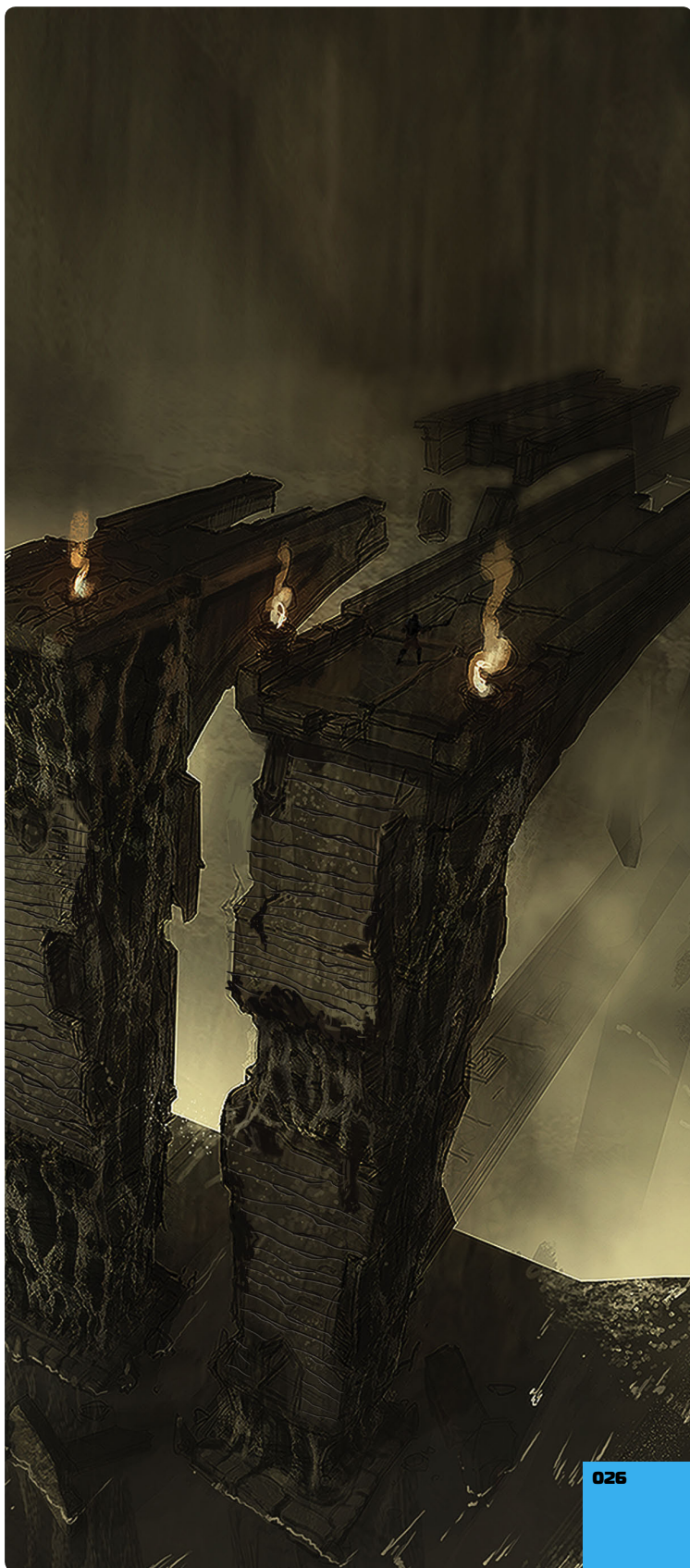
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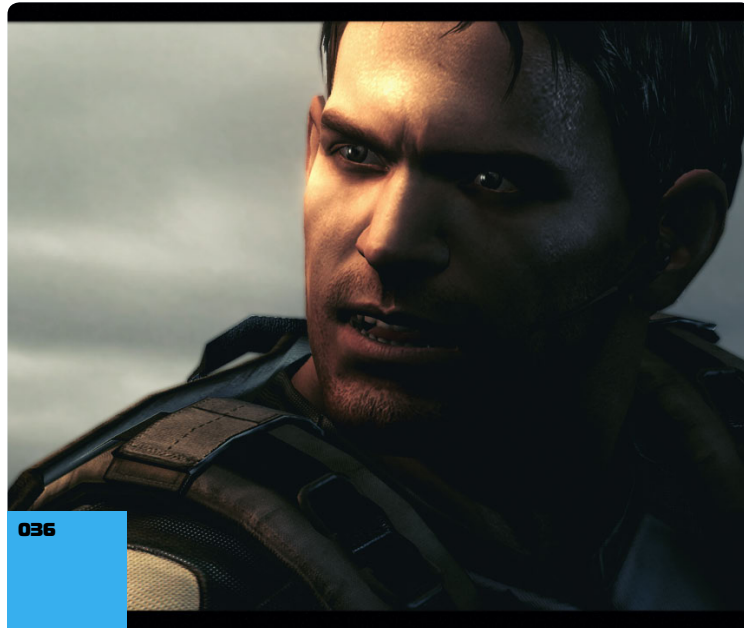
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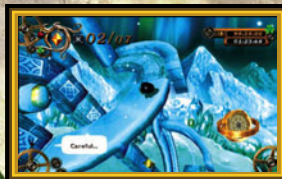
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2008 Anime Year In Review



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THIS YEAR, GET **RADICAL**

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Vol. 2: The Knives of Kush
Written by Steve Moore
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Doug Sirois
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A Philip Khrome Story
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Legacy of the Lost
Written by Ian Edginton
Illustrated by Radical Publishing's
exclusive artist Patrick Reilly
ON SALE AUGUST 2009



THE LAST DAYS OF AMERICAN CRIME

Written by Rick Remender
Illustrated by Greg Tocchini
ISSUE #1 COMING SOON

FVZA

Federal Vampire & Zombie Agency
Written by David Hine
Illustrated by Roy Allan Martinez
and Edwin David
ISSUE #1 ON SALE OCTOBER 2009



CHOLLY & FLYTRAP

Center City
Written and illustrated by Arthur Suydam
Collected HARDCOVER TRADE
ON SALE MAY 2009



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CUSTOM FLAME DECALED WARTHOG

Yuke's Akinai Games Company of America USA

In a piece of news that will probably look like a no-brainer in a few short years, Yuke's Company of America, located in Chicago, recently announced the launch of Akinai Games—a digital download division responsible for PSN, Live, and WiiWare development.

Yuke's Japan is based in Osaka, and is the company behind many wrestling games, including WWE SmackDown! and Rumble Roses. The American division has developed titles such as Double D Dodgeball and D1 Grand Prix. Akinai's first title will be Evasive Space for WiiWare, a Sci-fi shooter that flows like an intergalactic Ecco the Dolphin.



A Video Game Miracle

Gaming brings new life

The Herald recently reported some extraordinary news. A Wexford girl, unable to walk for years due to a virus, has begun to walk again thanks to physical therapy at a New York hospital.

Nicole Cahill does her fair share of personal training, but it is a video game that's helped her stay on top. Cahill uses the muscle-strengthening games of WiiFit to aid in her recovery. This is remarkable not because a video game is providing positive influence to the girl's life, but rather because someone has finally found a use for WiiFit. Play wishes Cahill continued success with her recovery.





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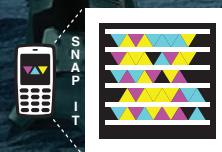


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XBOX 360.

Ok you've motivated me to mail. Let me get straight to the point-> I PROPOSE A SPLIT IN THE GAMING COMMUNITY.

The new factions will now be either 1 "IEG" (Interactive Entertainment Games) or 2 "Video Games" (because we had the name first)

"IEG" is the new description for all of the haters of gameplay and character-design. Individuals and groups interested in making gaming a 'legitimate' form of entertainment. (Last time I checked it's the #1 money maker. Thank you.) They worry about things such as simulating real-world experiences and emotions in games. This is straight out of the National Public Radio agenda! Wake up people. We don't want to move toward a Star Trek holographic chamber where you can live out some romance novel fantasy and gain the 5 star approval of some observational team that used to speak to people laying on couches. These are people that lay around dreaming of ways to 'help' others see the light. The problem is that this light is only a flashlight and they're the ones holding it. Eric-Jon Rossel Waugh's column *Romeo_check_fail* is a great example of this.

My problem with commentaries like Eric-Jon's is that they fail to see what games truly are : a form of

escape and enjoyment. In my opinion when someone tries their best to draw so many parallels with culturally respected forms of art and historical achievements it's only to cover the fact that they are 1- embarrassed that they still play video games at an age no longer deemed acceptable in our culture 2- unwilling to stop playing games because they still enjoy them. The result is a bad mixture of apologetics and overreaching psychological observations. Just grow up and learn that other peoples' opinions wont hurt you...

The second faction "Video Games" is a group concerned with a scant few things. Gameplay is King in this camp and is never frowned upon. Collecting coins, opening Crates, pulling switches and refilling hearts are just fine even though we've seen them 10,000 times before. The only thing that matters is that it's fun. I can promise you that these people will play the next Zelda game and blissfully refill their heart containers without begrudging the lack of progressive postmodern thinking on Nintendo's part for not leaving that overused idea behind. Themes in a game such as *SIMULATING* real life are not welcome (they have their place in the IEG faction). Great characters help us to remember our gaming experiences. Nathan Drake's (*Uncharted*) design

will not be remembered, but Nathan Spencer's (*Bionic Commando*) will.

The point is... leave games alone! Video Games do not need to grow up. They are fine the way they are. The only things that we need to see are improvements in game design, gameplay and graphics. We don't need emotional content haphazardly thrown in at the suggestion of some psychologist that some CEO hired to sell more units. Let us have fun. Hell I just resubscribed to *Play* for 2 years but I'm willing to settle for second class citizenship if that's what it takes. *Play* magazine can move all of the IEG games to the front of the book and reserve the back for Video Games.

Since that segregation hasn't happened yet, I'd like to say shame on you *Play* for putting the IEG biker *SIMULATION* "Ride to Hell" on the cover, and burying "Cave Story" on page 58. It seems to me that a freeware game developed by 1 amateur that found it's way to a Nintendo console is much more news worthy and industry shaking than the latest multi-million dollar sandbox game. Also where is the *PlayJapan* section?

Thanks for listening, and I hope this opens up a can of whoop-@\$\$
Phil N.

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THE GAMING CLICHÉ SPOTTER GUIDE

SEWERS

Forget the ice and lava levels of old, if there is one location that a contemporary game will more than likely send the player; it's down the tubes. Be it high fantasy or science fiction; sewer walking seems almost guaranteed to occur at least once in every title on the shelves. How do they feature in your game?

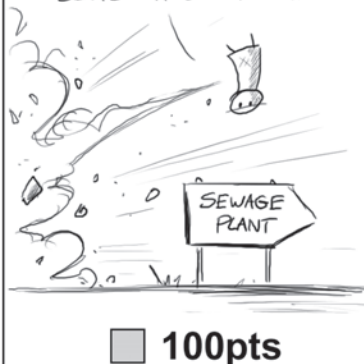


Sewers exist in the game, but you're never forced into them. They are an optional route that may be avoided by any who don't find the wandering of waste-filled, uniform, concrete tubing to be particularly inspiring. (Bonus points if the game is brave enough to feature virtual faecal matter)



An explosive or dramatic event sees the player character thrown into the sewers. They have the smarts to realise that it's not the most pleasant place to be, making the primary goal to find the way out as fast as possible.

WELL....THIS DAY'S GETTING BETTER AND BETTER....



Narrative dictates that you must descend into the depths of a city's waste system to retrieve something of value or importance.

Exactly **why** the object is down there is not explained. Either its previous owner was a little careless around the toilet or they had an unsavoury fetish for human excrement.

HOW DID THE SACRED SCEPTRE OF XINTHAR EVEN FIT DOWN THERE?!



Sewers are presented as a legitimate and easy path to take between two points, and it's never questioned.

No matter how well guarded a building is on the surface, there is always a conveniently open man-hole nearby that leads straight to said building's unguarded sub-levels.

SHOULD WE BLOCK IT? DUDE, THAT'S THE SEWER PIPE. WHO'D COME IN THROUGH THERE?





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Gaming Gone By File #001

words Eric L. Patterson

Resident Evil March 1996

In December 1989, Capcom released the horror RPG Sweet Home on the Famicom, a game that followed five people who find more than they bargained for in what was thought to be a deserted mansion.

A little over six years later, Shinji Mikami helped bring another mansion-based horror title to Capcom's library of releases: Resident Evil. Release in both the United States and Japan in March of 1996, the story of Chris Redfield, Jill Valentine, and the rest of the STARS crew would end up becoming a huge force in the world of video games, not only in sales and popularity, but also in terms of influence.

Though Resident Evil itself had no doubt taken some cues from earlier horror titles like Alone in the Dark and 7th Guest, it was the game to christen the now-widespread term "survival horror." As well, much like Street Fighter II had done for fighting games, Resident Evil has been credited with cementing the survival horror genre as a serious and legitimate part of video games, and in doing so, helped pave the way for broader acceptance of franchises such as Silent Hill, Fatal Frame, Clock Tower, and many more.



PSN Madness

The numbers tell all... or do they?

Let's dispense with some arbitrary numbers, shall we? According to a recently compiled report by Sony, over 17 million people are on the PlayStation Network worldwide, and going into the third year, 330 million downloads have been recorded. Little Big Planet has stood in the center of the fun recently, building out over 300,000 user-generated levels. Here are a few more interesting tidbits:

Approximate Number of Games Available for Download in North America: **162**

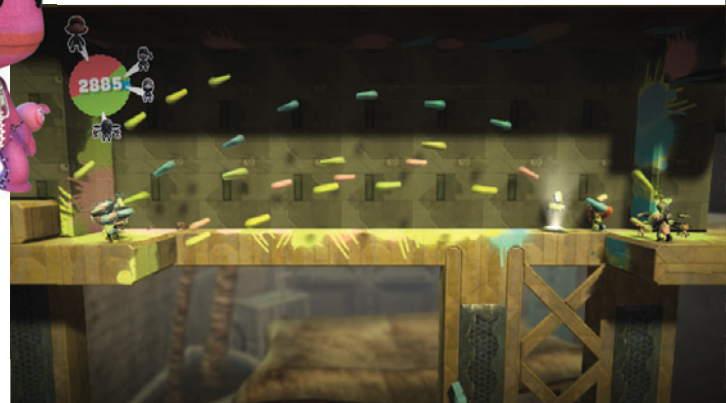
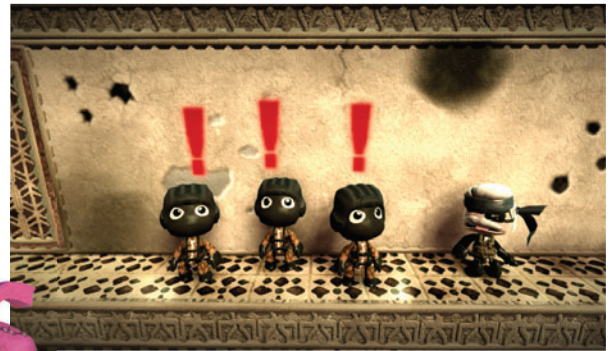
All time top download: **Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare Variety Map**

All time top downloaded Game: **PAIN**

Top downloaded LittleBigPlanet Costume: **LittleBigPlanet Sack in the Box Costume**

Top downloaded Game Demo: **Star Wars: The Force Unleashed Demo**

All time top downloaded movie: **The Dark Knight**



"Everything we found associated with video games came out negative."

The statement, issued by Brigham Young Professor Laura Walker, highlighted the results of a recent study on the effects of video games on adolescents. The study, published by the Journal of Youth and Adolescence, noted increased game playing leads to a worsening of personal relationships between the players and their parents and friends. "I assumed violent video games would be related to lower relationship quality with friends and family," one of the study's co-authors, Alex Jensen, said. "I didn't expect regular video games—nonviolent video game use—would be correlated to lower relationship quality."

The study, which was conducted after the interviews of 813 college students around the United States, also suggested an increase in pot smoking for game fans as compared to the rest of the population. Game fans, according to the study, are three times more likely to smoke pot than someone who does not play games. Walker and her student co-author also noted women who play a lot of games have a tendency to suffer from low self-esteem. Details of the study, including a more specific accounting of how the researchers came to their conclusions, remain unavailable as of press time. It also is uncertain as to extent of video games' negative influences on the respondents, or what some of its conclusions, specifically in regard to female game players and their esteem issues, actually mean.



(((Developer Sound Off)))

While it's a widely held opinion that the average gamer spends the majority of their free time chasing arbitrary achievements, shopping for black T-shirts and day-dreaming about what it would be like to engage in bad behavior with actual members of the opposite sex, the truth is that we occasionally stumble into alternative leisure activities in spite of ourselves.

For example, I love to read. Currently, I'm knee-deep in an intriguing piece of read-easy research known simply as *Nudge*. A study on the influence of the choice-giver in the decision making process, the book does its best to focus on the nature of choice in modern society and the ways in which we're influenced the myriad of external factors that slap our sense in the face at any given moment.

It talks a lot of smack and frequently fails to support its oft-erroneous assumptions, but one thing it highlights with painful clarity is that, as social organisms, we tend to

Selling the Drama? Not So Much, Folks...

words Brandon Justice

“... as social organisms, we tend to make a lot of stupid decisions.”



(((Developer Sound Off)))

make a lot of stupid decisions. Further, it goes to explain how and why we end up with these painful presumptions and that, more often than not, studies on the subject indicate that it's often a direct result of the imposition of ignorance on the uneducated masses.

Put simply, human beings tend to follow the pack, and the pack tends to be led by the dog with the biggest bark.

Nowhere is this more evident than the wild wonderful world of interactive entertainment. The average game developer lives and breathes in a world where ideas are cheap, but the freedom to act on them is beyond expensive. A land where marketing departments twist and turn data to beat every ounce of originality out of a product until it fits their finite mold of the last big hit. A place where the promise of prolonged profitability means more than this industry's ability to offer increasingly engaging experiences.

And you can tell me I'm overstating the issue if you'd like, yet I browse the newsstand and can't help but notice the ironic glee with which financial pundits applaud the CEO of one of our industry's leading publishers and his general distaste for video games on the cover of *Forbes*.

Are you ****king *kidding* me?

It makes for a catchy strap line and all that, but does anyone else find it odd that we're slowly but surely giving up the Holy Grail in favor of a Starbucks cup complete with coffee cozy, and gamers are supposed to be happy about it? That this is the undeniable answer to the age-old question of how gaming will enter into the mainstream?

Wow.

Sure, Kotick and Co. have done some great things, particularly in the relative freedom they afford their studios, but at the end of the day, they're just riding trends. Some would call them mavericks. Some trail-blazing leaders of the "new school" of game development. Visionary profiteers who are re-thinking what it means to be a AAA product.

Personally, I wouldn't blink to say that, in the scheme of things, the current focus on the industry's largest players does as much to limit creativity as it does to push up the bottom line. In that sense, these folks are failing us miserably.

Somehow, this consumer-crippled culture of buying and selling has lost all sense of self in favor of the next big license and a 73.2% chance of plausible profitability. They've sold out the creative minds of their generation in favor of a safe bet and quick mention on the evening news.

But that's not even the kicker. What kills me is to think that it will likely get worse before it gets better.

Take the Wii, for example. For my money, I could care less about how many units it sells or how many analysts are bullish on the fan-favorite fadbox and its shower of shovelware...the console's gaming library is tanking hard, and the fall isn't that difficult to understand.

While cheap and accessible, the fact is that the hardware is just lacking, right down to the motion sensitivity that sets it apart, making it hard to expand on

initial implementations of the whole "intuitive control" bit. As much as I like the idea behind it, that machine's limitations make it as much of a step back as it is a step forward, and its overall impact sends a bad message to the powers that be.

I say this because no matter what anyone tells you, game content is **not** less important than a massive install base and an open ear from your target demographic.

Period.

What's more, bad implementation of a good idea isn't the future, it's a frickin' technological speed bump. I love the fact that my grandma, nieces and nephews are suddenly playing games, but every ounce in me hates the fact that it takes recreating openly available recreational activities on an under-powered piece of hardware to do so.

Sure, we have increased our reach and our earnings, but I tend to think that we're doing something incredibly wrong in the process. We're giving up on what we know is coming in favor of what we think has arrived, and ultimately, we're losing out on a big opportunity to make the most of the current generation of consoles. We've been convinced that we're somehow locked in a costly battle between accessibility and imagination, and that every dollar we spend has to sit on one side of the war or the other.

Personally, I think it's a cop-out, and that the current industry-wide obsession with the elusive "casual" audience is a quiet, unfortunate admission of incompetence on many levels that begs for correction.

And yeah, I am occasionally excited by some of the stuff that's coming. Titles like *Scratch: The Ultimate DJ* will go a long way towards bridging the gap between music entertainment and genuine educational experience, but it would just as compelling with a d-pad. And yeah, the unstoppable awe that oozes from every pore of *Mad World* is enough to keep my Wii off eBay, despite the dust that continues to crush the cardboard in which it's stored, but it's unique style would be just as interesting on the 360 or PS3, or even the now-defunct Dreamcast.

Ultimately, I just wish there was a bit more heft behind the hype machine.

Take the recent interviews with our boy Riccitiello, where he talks about the importance of games. He says some genuine things about how people still think games are a lesser art form than novels or movies.

Well, John...that's mostly because they are.

Not because they have to be, or because they should be, but because that is what folks in your position have helped make them. Admittedly, EA's big cheese has recently done a lot to push things forward, and props to him on that front, but let's be painfully honest here:

While music, movies, and books manage to open up windows into foreign worlds, private lives, even glimpses into our very souls, we still consider it a 5-alarm fire when a game manages to appeal to even our most basic instincts by copying techniques that have been used in other mediums for decades.



Yeah, *Dead Space* is scary, but then again, so was *Resident Evil*. Hell, so was *Doom*, for god's sake. You'll need more than an upward incline in the average gamer's pulse rate if you going to get Ebert off the fence, fellahs, and rightfully so.

To quote Elbert Green Hubbard, "Art is not a thing; it is a way." Somewhere along the line, we seem to have lost ours.

We stopped trying to be trend-setters and started becoming salesmen. We stopped looking for a message that fit our product and started crafting a product that fit our message. We stopped listening to our gut and began looking to surveys and statistics and meaningless metrics for the meaning of life instead of picking up a controller and picking the experience apart until we manage to dial in on the unfortunate aspects of our hobby that keep it from taking the next step.

In all honesty, that's weak sauce.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't make every attempt to learn from our mistakes. I'm not saying a scientific approach to minimizing losses is evil. I'm just saying that if we're going to shout our medium's artistic merit from the rooftops, we should probably start asking ourselves if the paint-by-numbers approach is really the way to go.

I mean, does anyone actually think Radiohead spends the bulk of their time trying to figure out how to craft an outpouring of emotion such that it properly resonates with the "tween" demographic? Do guys like Danny Boyle build *Slumdog Millionaire* as a vessel to promote some game show? Was *The Fountainhead* written in some strange attempt to fuel a 10-year plan full of self-help tapes and infomercial madness?

Somehow I doubt it.

The point is, as valuable as it is to know what you're getting, it's a touch depressing to think about what you know you're not. If we're really going to start making an impact on the lives of the folks who enjoy our medium, that's an issue we need to start tackling sooner rather than later. Who's with me?

Brandon Justice is fighting in the trenches as design director for the fine folks at Play Hard Sports. Feel free to tell him why Cooking Cousin and Karaoke Hero VI will save us all at bjustice@playhard.net.

"the obsession with the elusive 'casual' audience is a quiet, unfortunate admission of incompetence on many levels..."



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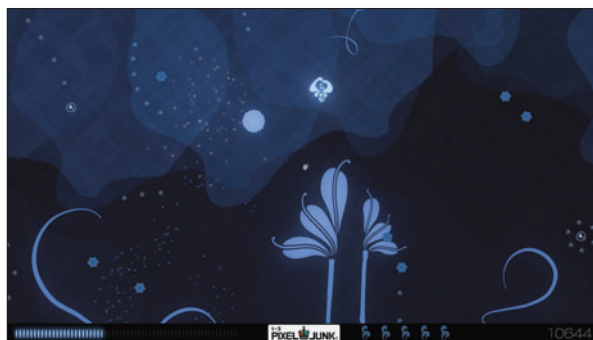
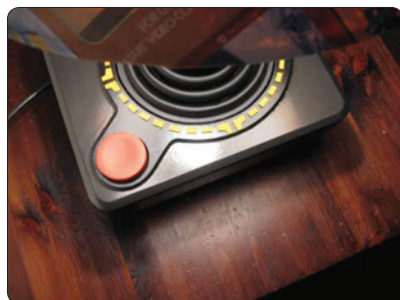
words Evan Shamoon

2600 Rays of Light

Sometimes the ephemeral light bulb goes off in a creator's mind, and two objects are combined to form a creative marvel: take, for example, the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, or Optimus Prime. Even better, however, is when one of the two items being combined is itself, in fact, a light bulb.

Created by Instructables.com user Seamster, the Giant Atari Joystick lamp is a brilliant piece of work. Using a replica of an Atari 2600 joystick and a box art-covered lampshade—along with a big red power button to turn the thing on and off, the contraption will challenge even the most videogame-hating of spouses to find anything wrong with it.

Build your own at Instructables.com:
http://www.instructables.com/id/Atari_2600_Joystick_Lamp/



Awarding the Independents

The Independent Games Festival has announced its list of finalists for this year's competition, culminating with this year's awards show which will take place on March 25. Topping the list of nominations is Q-Games' excellent PixelJunk Eden, which is nominated in the Visual Art, Audio and Technical Excellence categories, as well as Hemisphere Games' puzzle game Osmos, which garnered Technical and Design nominations, as well as a nomination for the overall Grand Prize. Other indie games of note include Amanita's Machinarium, the latest point and click adventure from the maker of the elegant Samorost series, and Between, the latest game from Passage creator and extremely poor man Jason Rohrer, whose game was curated by Esquire magazine (read the excellent piece about him and his games on Esquire.com). www.igf.com

Unlikely Gamer

Avid watchers of NBC's 30 Rock might be surprised that the man behind the distinguished Jack Donaghy was himself once a hardcore gamer—albeit as part of a larger, nearly life-ruining addiction to drugs and alcohol. "I would play video games from, like, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m., and I would wind down. Then I'd go home and go to bed," Baldwin writes in Moments of Clarity, a new book of personal testimonies of addiction compiled by actor Christopher Kennedy Lawford. When he was younger, Baldwin would spend his days high on cocaine and drunk on anything he could get his hands on. "This was the only way I could go 'beta' and go into that state I needed to be, where I could calm down and take my mind off everything. I didn't want to see anybody, talk to anybody, deal with anybody. Julian [the guy who ran the place] would put the key in the lock and open the door, and he would just kind of look at me like, 'Wow, I'm glad I'm not you.'"



Getty Images

2008 is in the books and the fat lady is standing on a Wii Fit singing into Wii Remote

The jury is in. There's no such thing as a "casual" gamer. There are Wii Fit and Wii Play players and Guitar Hero and Rock Band players—comprised of music fans, hardcore gamers that have been part of the beat scene since Parappa the Rapper, and of course all those people who only play GH and RB—but that's it. See any other "casual" games on the list? No. Did Rare reach the masses with the broader-reaching new Banjo? No. See any cooking games or fruity walk around and yap games? No. So can the development community finally toss the monkey off its back and get back to business please?

Top ten selling games of 2008

01	Wii Play W/Remote	Nintendo of America	5.28 million
02	Mario Kart Nintendo w/wheel	Nintendo of America	5.00 million
03	Wii Fit	Nintendo of America	4.53 Million
04	Super Smash Bros. Brawl	Nintendo of America	5.28 million
05	Grand Theft Auto IV 360	Take 2 Interactive	3.29 Million
06	Call of Duty: World at War 360	Activision	2.75 Million
07	Gears of War 2	Microsoft	2.31 Million
08	Grand Theft Auto IV PS3	Take 2 Interactive	1.89 Million
09	Madden NFL 09 360	Electronic Arts	1.87 Million
10	Mario Kart DS	Nintendo of America	1.65 Million



Insight from NPD industry analyst, Anita Frazier:

"While industry growth has not continued at the blistering pace we saw during the second and third quarters, December's 9% increase over last December brings the year in 19% ahead of last year, and sets a new record for total industry sales."

"This month marks the first time that industry revenue has topped \$5B in any single month. In 1997, annual revenues were \$5.1B, and now a single month has realized that level of sales."

"We get asked a lot why there are so many layoffs and studio closings occurring in the industry when it has just realized another record-breaking year. This is not a case of the rising tide lifting all boats. The increases are not being enjoyed equally by all manufacturers and publishers."

Hardware

"The NDS captures the top-spot for hardware sales this month, marking the first time that any hardware system has sold in excess of 3 million units in any single month."

"The record for single-month console system sales still belongs to the PS2 which sold 2.7 million units in December 2002."

"38 months into this generation of hardware, the three new systems have sold a combined 38.2 million units, whereas at the same point last generation, in December 2003, the three systems had sold 36.9 million units. Factoring in the continued strong sales of the PS2 even after the new systems were released, 52 million systems have sold at retail since November '05."

Software

"Software sales reached nearly \$11B, which is more than total industry revenues were in 2005."

"While some have wondered if the popularity of Guitar Hero and Rock Band is waning, both properties realized their best month yet in dollar sales, and combined represent 16% of total software dollar sales this month."

"The variety of content on the top 10 list shows just how viable non-traditional content has become. Not only can these games succeed, they can end up on the top 10 list for the year."

And there you have it folks. What will 2009 bring? What else? Sequels!

romeo_check_fail

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

Block 003:

The Fun Factor

“Contrary to everything you will ever read on the Internet, ‘fun’ is not an end unto itself, but rather a means.”

I’ve been saying that the threshold for mature discussion is romance, and so this is where videogames should look for thematic development. Yet our ability to explore a theme hinges entirely on our command of grammar, and our problem with game grammar is not so much in the grammar we’ve got as in how we understand it. So now what we’ve got is a social problem.

You can see how difficult this is to pick apart. Before we get complicated, let’s be absolutely clear what we’re talking about.

A friend you may know once paraphrased to me the words of a man I forget. His gist was that art is impractical. He meant well enough; he was just saying that you can’t eat or drink art, or fend off a seething lion with a street mime. Yet this attitude is not only irresponsible; it’s hurtful. It is to some extent culturally destructive. And it is pervasive. Here I will try to balance that.

Art is in fact a tool. Its method is to communicate with our subconscious, using the metaphors we use to understand our world. Its function is to expand our perspective on life. Its object is to leave us a notch wiser, more intuitive, more perceptive, more empathetic. Whereas education is exercise for the rational part of our minds, art is exercise for the irrational, where all concepts originate. Properly applied, it makes us greater people.

Although this function is important, it is intangible, and so easy to dismiss in the lurid haze of “fun.” When you describe art as useless or impractical, or you address a work in terms of “entertainment value,” what you are doing is ignoring both the purpose of human communication and the boundaries of your own personal world in favor of instant gratification. As medicine, that does have its place. Yet to use it as a touchstone is to spread ignorance about the functions of the tool at hand.

The in-group starts to fetishize shapes for their own sake, like the red slippers its mother used to wear when she tucked it in at night. Lust becomes both object and precedent. Discussion winds around this black hole of progress, diminishing to a one-dimensional balancing act of a priori awesome; a decadent ritual in aid of nothing. To an outside eye...well, have you ever seen Caligula? The discussion is culturally stigmatized, as are all who take part in it.

And with good reason. Compared to the investment required, the personal or social benefits of such a discussion are slim at best. If anything, habits being what they are, this culture reinforces the spiritual weaknesses in all who take part. More damning, though, is that in quantity it adversely affects the broader discussion. As the twenty-first century info-byte news industry should illustrate, whatever does not further a discussion serves to entrench it, making it that much harder for a commanding voice to break free and lead it down a constructive path.

Now, I’m not trying to take away anyone’s toys. What I’m doing is making a point about what I’ll go ahead and call *the fallacy of absolute value*. I’m saying that the worth of a thing cannot be divorced from its relative function—be that physical, emotional, or spiritual; personal or social. Value is a subjective construct. There is no physical law for the value of a hammer or the Beatles’ back catalog; they are important as far as a person finds them useful. Which is precisely the mechanism of our lives that art serves to explore.

Contrary to everything you will ever read

on the Internet, “fun” is not an end unto itself, but rather a means. It may be clearer if we put our cards on the table: when gamers talk about “fun,” what they are really describing is reward structure. What they are saying is, they like to be made to feel special in return for doing stuff. And well, sure. Right on. Reward is what drives us all, and videogames are a study of action and consequence. Perfect match, yes? Well, yes. But.

Okay, life. Let’s say you have a child, or a puppy. You love it dearly and so you drown it in indiscriminate praise. It will never know want. Any whim is provided for. What do you get? An entitled, undisciplined terror, that will very likely destroy the world at its earliest opportunity. Yet if you guide your charge toward, and then applaud, personally and socially constructive behavior—if you set about to instill in that charge a sense of ethics, responsibility, and empathy—you wind up with a self-possessed, socially conscious individual who may be the world’s only hope during the next alien invasion.

I’m making videogames sound stodgy and polite, like a sort of work. But, well, no. As with education, art only seems like work

if you’re doing it wrong. For this impression, and it is a fair one if you don’t look very closely, we have many undisciplined artistes to thank—those who are more concerned with their own profundity than in holding a functional conversation with their audience. It’s the equal opposite to this fun-for-fun’s-sake nonsense, in that both camps exhibit a stark failure of communication. It’s all “me me me,” like your nightmare date.

When people rail against “art,” what they are resisting is a discussion that they feel excludes and disrespects their own contributions—and rightly so; what’s a relationship without respect? Dysfunctional, that’s what. It doesn’t matter whose fault it is.

Every videogame should be “fun” on some level, in that the entire structure of a videogame should be based on determining the correct rewards in the correct places at the correct times to shape the future relationship between the game and the player. The ideal narrative cloud will resemble a TV showrunner’s five-year plan for his serial drama. You know basically where you want to end up, and what notes you want to hit along the way in order to convey your themes and notions to the audience. What you can’t predict with more than a passing competence is the practicalities you will face along the way; you just have to lay down a structure for dealing with whatever life presents you, and incorporating it toward your goal.

There is, for instance, the practicality of word count. Depending on what life presents us, next month we’ll finally get around to applying some of this rhetoric. Come on, it’ll be fun!



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DANTE'S

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate - Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.

words Brady Fiechter

Forgive me Father, for I have sinned: I have gleefully and willingly skewered a plump pack of screaming babies with a huge scythe, and I look forward to doing it again. It's Ok, though, because clearly these babies are of the demonic variety, and they screech and aren't at all cute when they're trying to jump on my back and kill me.

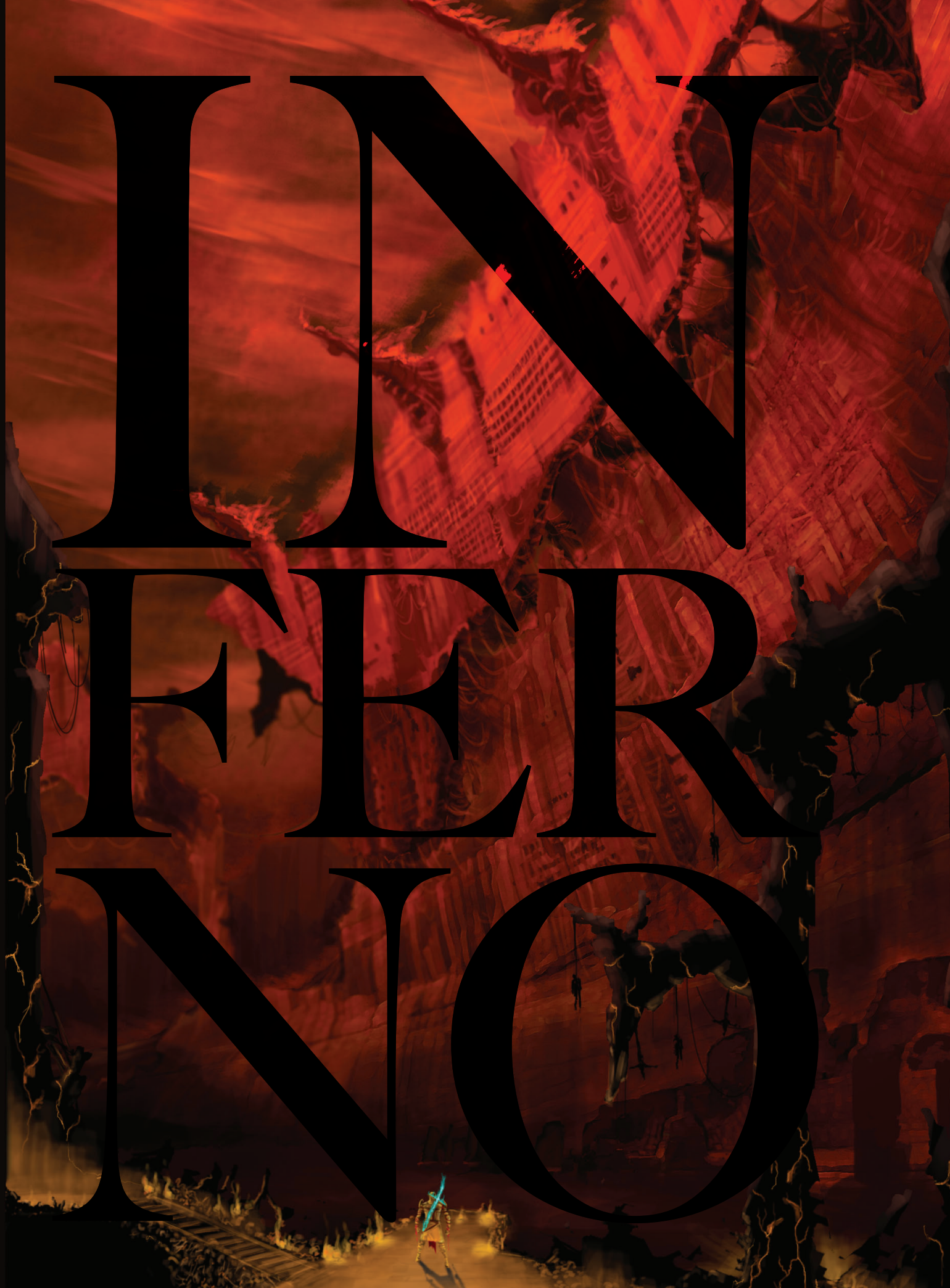
This, some will say, is inevitably what happens when babies aren't baptized: they get banished to hell, where they wait around in creepy rooms for someone like myself to commence with the mass cleansing. "These little guys seems harmless enough at first, but once they start ganging up on you you're in trouble, they're harder to kill," explains Jonathan Knight, writer, producer, and director of *Dante's Inferno*, an action adventure with the loaded tagline: "go to hell."

It is here, in this awful eternal dungeon that

Lucifer calls home, that you will be descending into the very center of the damned, in search of your great love Beatrice. The game is pulled from *Dante's Inferno*, the massive first section of the medieval poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Within the extraordinary visions of hell depicted in the poem, there are nine circles: limbo, lust, gluttony, greed, anger, heresy, violence, fraud, and treachery. Each of these circles provides a thematic backbone for the journey. Today, I am facing the sins of Limbo, which begins on the shores of Acheron. "It's the arrival," explains Knight. "You see bodies falling from the sky, and the idea is that they're all collecting at the bottom. There are cinematics that add to the horror, that tell the story of the damned being crowded into the hall of this giant boat, which is controlled by Charon. The central theme of this part of the poem is the crossing into Limbo and then the judging of the damned, who are sentenced by King Minos to the lower eight circles. You get inside the boat, then figure out a puzzle how to get on top of it, then when you get to the end of the level, you ultimately

fight King Minos. In defeating the judge of the damned you're able to start opening the way to future circles."

Before we get to start fending off maniacal babies and ripping the heads off winged demons and releasing souls, Dante needs a good, sharp weapon, and there's really no better place to start than a showdown with Death. "The opening level is Dante at war, he's mortally wounded, Death comes for him, but he fights back," begins Knight. "He'll slaughter death, wrest his scythe from his hands. And Dante can fight now. It becomes his signature weapon. He returns home to find that his fiancée Beatrice has been murdered; we'll find out why later. Her soul is seduced and pulled down into hell by Lucifer, so Dante chases them, ripping open the gates of hell on the back of a giant creature. And this becomes fundamentally a rescue mission. The thing that's going to be driving the player throughout the game is to rescue Beatrice from Lucifer's grasp. Just like King Kong captures the girl, or you look at Donkey Kong—that classic story



of pure, evil masculine force that has seduced and taken this innocent female.”

As the journey begins, your scythe is the main instrument of destruction. Dante also has a cross he can carry on his belt, calling on it as a secondary weapon. “We’re building out 7, what I like to call holy powers, around that cross,” Knight points out. “The way we are incorporating his weapons, they really define who he is, apart from other video game characters. He’s got that strong holy warrior quality going on.”

The cross is an important immobilizer, stunning enemies when put to good use. “The basic iteration also has the ability to exorcise an enemy, get increased soul return and so forth,” explains Knight. “It’s got a few different combos off of it. Almost every one of Dante’s move branches into something else.”

As I’m introduced to the core of the combat system, the elegance of motion is instantly apparent. “Running at 60 frames per second, it was a really important goal for me,” agrees Knight. “We’re committed to do that from beginning to end. We just want that feeling of control that is right the moment you touch it.”

Dante’s scythe can be cast through a fierce and light attack arc, launching enemies into the air, twirling and extending around large groups to set up multiple-digit combos. A block is a strong focus, and a roll move is in there as well for more evasive maneuvering. When you wear down certain classes of creatures, a grab move can end in a brutal pre-determined finishing move, like the one I quite enjoyed where Dante positions the enemy in a compromising stance and lops off their head. “It’s important, too, that we let people know there’s going to be magic in the game,” says Knight, “even if we aren’t ready to talk about it.”

The extent of magic use may be in, um, limbo, but it’s worth mentioning that you’ll come away from each circle with a magic specific to the theme of the area. Souls will act as the economy of the game, pooling for upgrades on a number of paths. “We can’t really go into depth on that just yet either,” admits Knight, “because there’s gonna be a lot more to the game than we’re ready to reveal. It’s big.”

One way to snatch up a big drop of souls is by seeking out the shades in the level. “Several

times throughout a level you’ll see one of these poor bastards who lost his way, he’s off the beaten path, cowering in fear, muttering to himself,” explains Knight. “We’ve actually named these guys from the poem; for the really die-hard enthusiasts, there’s going to be a connection between each one of these and a counterpart in the poem.”

You have a choice to punish or absolve, and the way this works, if you punish him, you’re gonna get a brutal animation and get a thousand souls. If you choose to absolve, then you’re gonna get a minigame. The minigame will increase in difficulty throughout the game, and if you nail it, then you’ll get two thousand souls. If you screw it up, you get nothing. The message is, it’s hard to be holy, like in life, but the reward is much greater. And then again, if you want to keep it simple and punish the shade, you’re guaranteed a soul return every time.”

My time with Dante’s Inferno reveals the core combat, but in a game about journeying to the depths of hell, certainly the adventurous qualities must shine through. The puzzles are described as physical in nature, opening up the setting as a place of discovery and interaction. “That’s what’s fun for me about puzzles in this sort of game, really being able to move stuff, alter the environment,” adds Knight. “But we see Dante as kind of a luddite, he’s barged into hell and is going to leave a wake of destruction

“The message is, it’s hard to be holy, like in life, but the reward is much greater.”-Knight





Giants live in hell, so why not go for a ride?

in his path. You have the bit with the giant creature where he rips off the head of Charon, the boat crashes, the tower starts crumbling down around you and you have to scramble as everything is falling apart around you.

The reason our tag line is 'go to hell,' it's sort of tongue and cheek, but at the same time it really represents the fantasy: it's a real place, and you're gonna go there. You're gonna descend the 9 circles of hell, not in a teleporting kind of way, but in a physical journey. One of the reasons the poem has proven to be so popular is that Dante really does describe hell in such a way that makes it feel so real, it's right beneath your feet. That setting is so spectacularly described, we had to do it justice. As we got in to it, there was no need to invent all that much... The game is called Dante's Inferno, not just Dante. The

Inferno in many ways is the number one character in the game, and I think that, again, 'go to hell,' that summarizes that fantasy. Actually going there, seeing what it's like. Clearly the uniqueness of the setting, the atmosphere that's created there, is a big deal."

Where would you say you felt you could take the most liberties deviating from such a complex tapestry?

"The story," answers Knight. "The story of the poem is fundamentally this: Dante and Virgil walk through hell and talk a lot about what they see and they're trying to get to Beatrice. That's about all that happens in the fairly



"You're gonna descend the 9 circles of hell, not in a teleporting kind of way, but in a physical journey."-Knight



drama-free story. This was the area we took the most liberty with and really needed to do the right thing to make it work for the game, more drama and conflict. We've done a lot of work on the hero. We've created a character who returns home from the Crusades, he's war weary veteran of the battle of Acre, as a fierce fighter he has a history, a past that we're gonna dive into. It's all based on details from history, Dante the poet fought in the Italian civil wars, his great grandfather was a crusader, we kind of build on those ideas. We're going for this antihero. We're also enhancing Lucifer's role as the antagonist. He's in the poem, talked about a lot, but we're giving him a much more active role in the story to increase the conflict.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW

Jonathan Knight Director, **Ash Huang** Art Director

What led you to the poem as the foundation for a game?

Jonathan Knight: I took a break after the last game, we had a baby, so when I had time I would crack the laptop at 2 in the morning every night. I wanted something dark, something macabre, and I wanted to do something set in the afterlife. That was my first major priority. The story, something out of legend or mythology, I really felt like the game industry really deserves tried and true game stories. I didn't want to just write some story about a guy who does stuff. I wanted to reach into something more, draw upon something that I knew that had been working for centuries. In my research, Dante's Inferno kept coming up. It ended up just feeling like the right idea: why don't we just do Dante's Inferno instead of making some other game about the afterlife. It seemed like the right idea, so we ran with it.

Talk a bit about the broader sense of these circles.

You got to the 9 circles, you are never getting out. They increase in the severity of the punishments, the least severe are in Limbo, and the most in Treachery. They're pretty neatly divided into two big categories, and separated by a giant wall fortress within this, what Dante calls the city of Dis. So the lower four circles, the nether hell, are basically in this giant, crazy city. More and more demons, more and more punishments and ultimately Lucifer is at the center of that. The upper circles are basically what he calls the sins of the flesh. Dante the

poet really separates the sins of the flesh from sins of malice. Sins of the flesh are the victimless crimes, if you will, things you are doing to yourself, they're bad for you. They're hard to help. Animals succumb to this. The sins of malice are specifically designed to help other people. They require that they use God-given human faculty for reason, for planning. These sins, violence, fraud, treachery, these are things you have to use your human capacity to formulate a plan to perpetrate the sin upon another person.

Honestly, I think you have a lot to live up to drawing from this poem. I have very specific expectations.

I don't want to get too... this might be a little bit arrogant to say we think Dante would like it. But if you read the poem, read about him, he really wanted to reach a mass audience, it was pretty unusual, almost heretical, to write in Italian, the way he did. And it's very fantastical and over the top, his vision. I don't think people like him and Shakespeare, they didn't intend for their works to be held up as these boring, lofty things. They wanted them to be enjoyed by the masses. People pay a lot for these games, we want them to have a great time. It's like playing these war games, I don't want to really know what it's like to be in a war. I just want to have a good time. I don't want it to be so complex that it's punishing and I don't have a good time.

You really emphasize speed of play as part of that fun.

Fast, fun, responsive. Short bursts of entertainment. I know for me, I don't always get those 4, 5, 6 hours of stretches of gaming; it's a complicated world. I have a baby, some people don't have kids but they have so many other things pulling them in different directions. I wanted to make a game you could play for an hour and come back to, play for a half an hour. So I wanted it accessible, not overly complicated to learn how to play. Like the other great games in the genre, the hardcore gamer is gonna find that they are gonna fine tune the control of the character far more than the casual gamer, it will be very rewarding for the hardcore guy.

The description "simple" can get a bad rap, but the elegance of simplicity... do you want to think of the combat in this way?

Well, I don't want to call the game simple. I like to use the analogy of the onion, the thing that you do all the time, like swinging that scythe, that constant, second to second action; or if you're making a shooter, simply shooting off that gun better be fun. That's really the approach we took, a basic light attack, swinging the scythe through a heavy attack, should be fun, responsive and rewarding; it's gotta be, you're doing it a lot. We couldn't move on to other things till that felt great. And then you build out from there, you add to that second-to-second action, and then start layering in what I would call the minute to minute stuff, the level design, the puzzle design, the variety of the enemies. And then your hour to hour mechanics, now we can add

"People pay a lot for these games, we want them to have a great time." -Knight

in new magics and upgrades and so on. Really working from the inside out. I want that depth in there, the more you put into it, the more you get out. But not at the cost of pick up and play, have a great time. We're paying attention to frequent checkpoints, it's just not fun to do stuff over for no good reason.

The Dead Space team is a big part of this production. What do you see coming out of that?

Well, we have a studio vision, that we appear to be making things that are darker, more mature subject matter, that are strong, immersive narrative experiences that take you to far away places. Another element of that is that the studio is really committed to basically putting out games that are heavily polished and really finished. Dead Space represented that, a really clean, finished experience. We're really benefiting from the people coming over from that project, bringing their rich experience and sensibilities. And yet it's not a survival horror game, it's an action adventure. From

a genre and design standpoint, it's a bit of a new team. Bringing together a complete team, some of them coming from outside studios but who have an amazing track record with other games. We're getting the best of both worlds. You know, even the fact that we have a lot of guys who worked on Return of the King bodes well.

You brought up some key talent from outside the studio as well.

We reached outside and recruited some big talent. This is a very design driven game for me, it's a gamers' game, I knew we needed the design talent to pull it off. I could name a lot of people, but Steve Desilets, who designed Half Life levels, he was a lead at Oddworld, he was on Stranger's Wrath. Michael Cheng designed on God of War 2, he also was a Metroid Prime level designer, and we got him as the lead level designer in this game. Big chops on the design side, and a lot of great designers followed them in here. On the writing, especially major cut scenes and overall screenplay for the game, we

reached out to an Academy award nominated writer who we will be talking more about in the future. He and I co-wrote the script together. And Wayne Barlow, our concept artist, who was on Hellboy 2. Barlow's Inferno was one of the original inspirations for me and the game. I basically picked up the phone and called him and he said he'd start Monday.

What's proved difficult in all this?

Making games is really difficult. You're just seeing the tip of the iceberg here with Limbo, but I would say really, we want to deliver on, really beat people's expectations on what hell might be like in a video game. There's a lot of places you can go in a video game, contemporary settings, fantasy settings, sci-fi settings, that are a little bit easier to deliver on. There's no real reference for hell. We do a lot of reference gathering, but everybody's gonna have a little bit of a different expectation of what hell is supposed to be like. Some of them are going to be quite personal, nightmarish, some are gonna be quite literal and epic, and then you're gonna have everything in between. Some will be contemporary, some will be classical. We have to somehow deliver on a place that no one has ever seen before. I would say that is probably one of the biggest challenges. Tough but also exciting.

I know you are guarded right now, but approaching the gameplay within these themed areas...

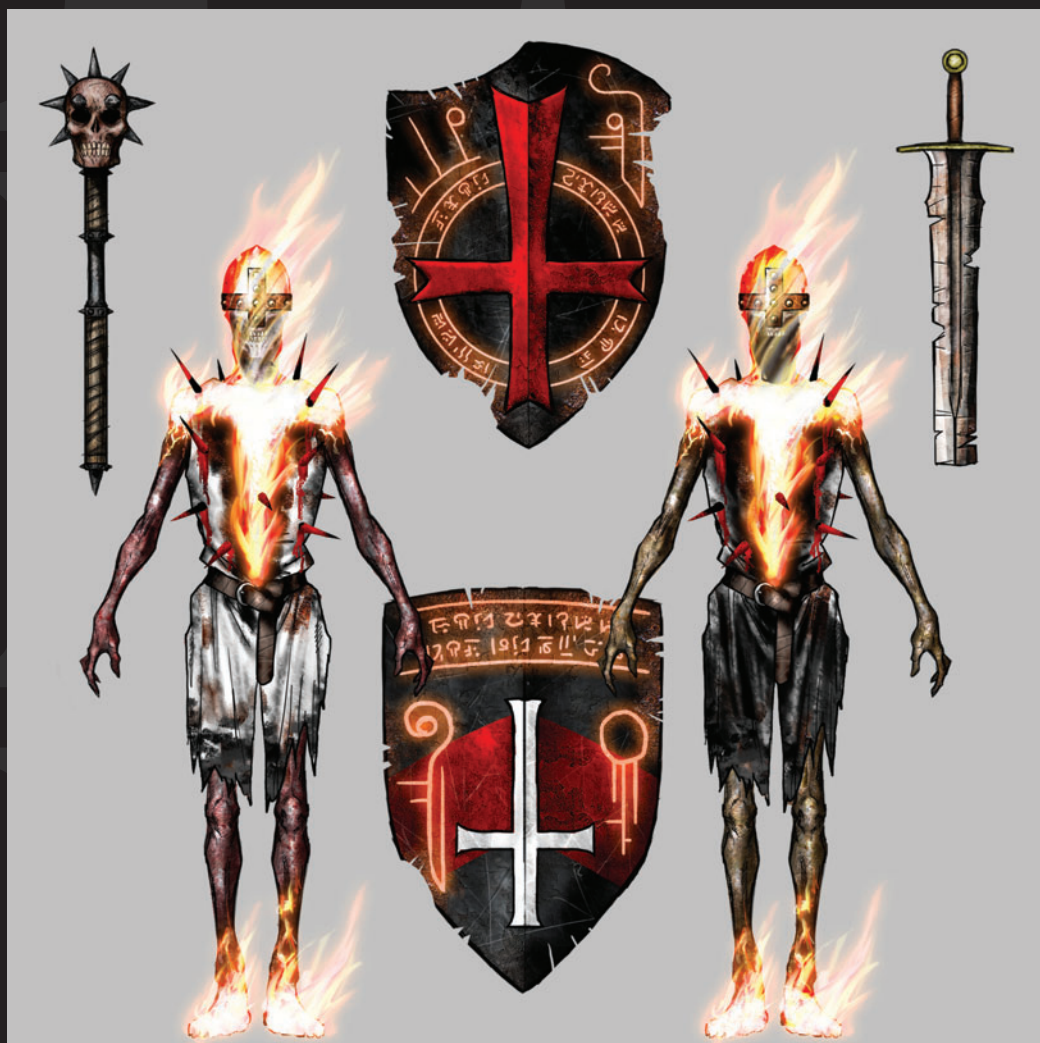
And you know, yeah, it's difficult to talk about the game and the challenges without talking about the gameplay. Ultimately the environments and narrative are in support of a fun game. It's simply is a huge challenge to make a game that is fun to play, when you pick it up it's immediately responsive. It feels great. There are a lot of intangibles in that as well. That's a problem you have to solve first. I know we're gonna get there with the look and the environments, we've got an incredible amount of talent to deliver on that stuff. That's hard, sure, but I sleep better at night knowing the game is already fun to play. We're not trying to make a movie here, we're making a game.

Beatrice in the game does what exactly?

She's a pretty... she's more than just the trophy. The game starts out as a rescue mission to get her out of hell, and we'll just say it goes from there.

This is not straight action. You are certainly extending the adventure of the world into the experience.

Absolutely. This is an adventure game as much as it is an action game. Dante as a character has a strong adventurer in him, and he has to, he's descending the nine circles of hell in a very physical way. You will have a suite of physical navigation abilities, a few of which you saw. And there's a lot more work to do on the gameplay. We're not about to rest.



"It's not that we don't need imagination. But so much imagination is laid out, all the descriptions Dante raises"—Huang



Dramatic set pieces are your jungle gym.



How close do you need to stay true to the poem? This isn't a comic book; you're gonna have a lot less fanboy screaming to deal with if you toy with some of the foundation.

Any creative endeavor works better when there's a unity of purpose, and I think that what I encourage the team with, if we have to make a choice between blue and red, go the poem first, let's see what's there. We don't need to start inventing unless it serves the needs of the game, of course the most important thing is the game has to be fun. The gameplay must be strong. All things being equal, let's do the poem. Sure there are a number of people who know the poem so well they're gonna catch things that we do, but that's exciting to try to put stuff in there. Every chance we have to make a small creative choice we're going to choose something that's true to the poem.

Ash, as art director, what are you bringing to this game?

Ash Huang: We're drawing a lot of inspiration from the poem. It's not that we don't need imagination. But so much imagination is laid out, all the descriptions Dante raises. It's definitely a much darker sensibility, and a lot of artists love working on that kind of really dark stuff. In terms of the sobriety of the story, the darkness of the worlds that are painted, it's already a rich pile of stuff to draw from.

What's the appeal of the dark material you speak of?

Because we're all bent by nature. I'm pretty sure that's what it is [laughs]. The term artist's angst, yeah, there's something lurking underneath. It's a place we don't often want to go to, but we do, it's there. Religion is such a powerful thing, the themes of the poem touch on so many different things that have embedded themselves into things like the Christian myths. That stuff combined with the darkness of the world Dante painted is an artist's dream to work on a project like that. You can really get into all that stuff in a deep, emotional way.

How do you carve out Dante as the central figure?

First you go straight back to the poem and sort of look at who Dante Alighieri was, as a source of inspiration, and then build on who he was; and obviously we are an adaptation of the poem, so there are certain things in the character design we wanted to bring out, and of course with the nature of our game, he is a warrior, so that part is layered on top. We looked at a lot of the traditional depictions of who Dante was, things like the laurel, and then how to make sure that characterization is placed into the design. His laurel became something that had a certain kind of more aggressive profile, so when you look at our Dante, and the classical depictions of the character, there's kind of a direct line there visually. We extend that to make him suitable

for the game environment. Something that will resonate with a player.

With such an ancient work, so much interpretation out there: How do you sift through all that and find your own way?

Well, it's a combination of a lot of things. You start with classical depictions of what people imagine hell to be. I mean, he actually painted in his book one of our first widely accepted visions of what hell might be like. So you start with all of that general mythos first, because when you talk to somebody about a demon, or Lucifer, everybody already has similar conceptions. The approach was to look at that stuff, understand it, then kind of say where do we go from here. Then it comes back to the artists to add their own twists on it relative to how we viewed the game, how we adapted the story, how different we want to take things.

Darkness is a word that gets thrown around a lot in games. As an artist, what darkness are you seeing: is it fear, regret, damnation? Darkness is the subject matter, the sobriety of it. In a literal, in terms of how we might imagine light to be in the world we paint, darkness could be a metaphor for evil, all those sorts of things. All these levels compounded together create and amplify what that general darkness

is. The place we are going here, we don't really have to tell people what hell is. People have a pretty good conception that hell is not a nice place to go. We already know that, we understand that.

How are you looking at fear as a theme?

We're not attaching to fear in the sense of "boo!" We're not trying to surprise you. But without being highbrow about it, it's kind of a more thoughtful darkness we're looking toward.

Knight: It's even a sadness and regret. Hell is all those awful things, torture and whatever, but it's also a fear you personally have to face there. The tapestry of Dante is a fusion of all these things that represent sin, personal sin to be faced in hell.

With all the takes on hell, are you searching for more of a comic-book, Spawn-like interpretation of hell? What tone are you bringing to its visual style?

Huang: Reading the poem, and I just finished watching the early 20th-century Inferno movie this morning... But there's kind of this classical depiction of hell, which is interesting. And it's interesting because it's a nice thing to always go back and look at. Again, it's kind of a thoughtful version of hell. It's a great place

to start from. Without giving away too much, we aren't stopping there. But we're definitely inspired by the early artists before us, their classical notions of what hell might be like. And across all types of arenas, not just the poem. We certainly have a lot of contemporary stuff to look at, but we often go back to the source.

Who is a personal favorite artist who's depicted hell in his work?

Bosch is pretty interesting. That guy was tripping out on something, I don't know what it was, but it was pretty interesting [laughs]. Certainly the engravings that Dore did, which accompany the poem. And then later versions I really dig, Wayne Barlow is just awesome stuff.

Are you searching for more epic spaces, more intimate spaces? An epic poem latches onto so much.

Knight: How about if we just say, "yes"? Yeah, all of the above [laughs].

This idea of hell in your mind, some will argue that religion comes from that fear of pain and death. We all hold onto something powerful. There's so much you can bring to the table.

Yeah, it's an awesome project in terms of where we can ultimately go. It's wide open. And we are still going...



How are you working with Wayne Barlow?

When we started out, we were a pretty small team. We started discussing things a long time ago. If you start looking at talking about hell, among contemporary artists, he's touched a lot of different stuff. You don't need to look any further. His brain sits in a very interesting space to say the least. It didn't take a whole lot of thinking to go after him.

What do you think is one of the key ways to invoke the emotion in the player in a strictly technical way?

Lighting. Lighting is huge. Lighting in this world especially is a big one. And then obviously at the end of the day how we conceive and design hell in our own way that is indeed beyond what you've seen before, it's our personal touch. Those two combined create a huge part of our unique atmosphere. But you know, it all starts on paper. We have to be able to achieve what's in our minds.

I know the narrative is somewhat sprawling, but the emotion in the journey, the classic tale of Beatrice...

Knight: He really sees Beatrice as the source of the ideal, pure, perfect romantic love. And they never got to be together. It was a totally unrequited love, they were married to other people for political and monetary reasons. His wife and kids stayed behind in Florence, he was banished, and he obviously didn't love his wife. Imagine your husband is banished for writing a love poem to another woman. It's incredible love story in its own right, it's incredible that it's real, and it's also representative of a piece of fiction. So we're definitely searching to capture all that, build on that.

It's fascinating the influence the poem has had on culture.

We simply can't overstate the influence of the poem throughout culture, throughout western culture. Many of the great masters treated Dante's *Inferno* as Dante envisioned it and brought it to life on canvas, with sculpture. Rodin spent a good decade studying the poem, many of his sculptures like the *Gates of Hell* are inspired by the poem. The *Thinker* is Dante contemplating the gates of hell. Many people don't know that was Rodin's vision of Dante. Dore, and up to modern day, artists like Wayne Barlow, who painted his vision called *Barlow's Inferno*. It's felt through literature, music, some of the great composers have written symphonies about the *Divine Comedy*. And all the way up through pop culture, Milla Jovovich's album in the 90s, called the *Divine Comedy*. And we thank her for her cover art

[laughs].

How is Dante more than your typical lug-headed video game hero out to save the damsel in distress?

Where it gets interesting, as he fights and defeats the circles of hell, he has to face the sins of his own past. In many cases the characters from his past who are now in hell. And through this device, which is the tapestry that's sown into his flash, he literally wears this tapestry in the shape of a cross that he himself has sewn in. These continual scenes form his past are going to come together, come to life in the game and tell the story of his past sins. And we're going to learn that his sins have actually been the cause of Beatrice's damnation. There is a very significant plot twist where he realizes it is less about a rescue mission and sort of changes to become more of a redemption story. It's not just about saving her, it's about saving himself.

It is a story of redemption.

Absolutely. Dante sees himself as flawed, and he sees Beatrice as the source of his redemption. We are making our Dante more guilty of more horrible things than the poet Dante has, this is a heightened version of the story, a much more specific version of what Dante has done that are sins. Some scholars have even gone so far as to interpret Dante committing suicide at the beginning of the poem. Dante has a very different way of looking at himself in the first part of the game.

You've stressed the importance of maintaining central themes from the poem.

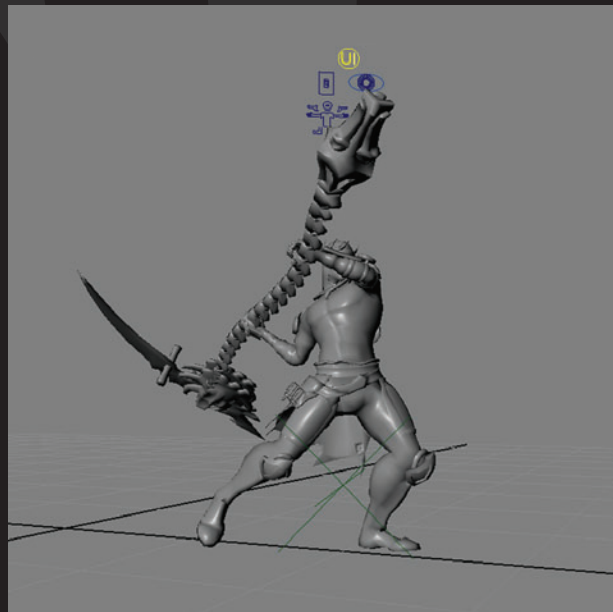
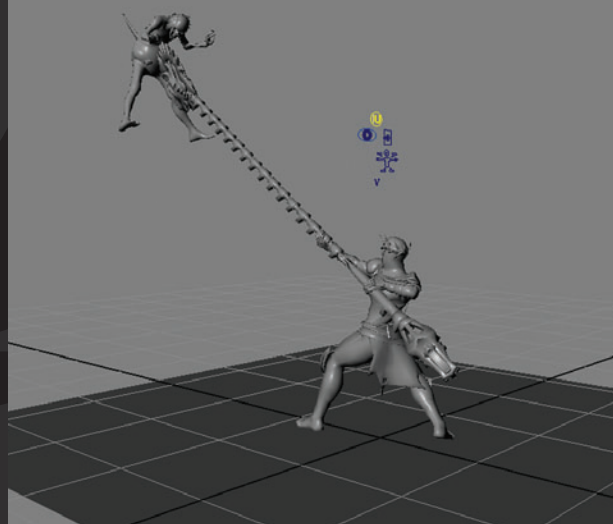
Thematically, I think we're being true to the poem. Death, sin, the afterlife, and also free will. And that's a big thing for Dante the poet, which is that people choose their life, they chose to be good or bad. They aren't preordained. Many people in the medieval times, a lot of movements were about this idea of predestination, but he really believed God is hands off by the choices we make, but basically you suffer those consequences for all eternity when you die.

He's not necessarily in step with church thinking, he's really making a point, it's a worse sin to hurt other people, and it's a worse sin to betray your human capacity for reason. So obviously we wanted to be faithful to the order of the sins in the game, because Dante's put so much thought into it. He's also very specific about geography and landmarks, he and Virgil describe so much as they travel. These are just a few examples, there are 4 rivers that converge in hell, a lot of buildings and landmarks. We are gonna be incredibly faithful

DESIGNING BEHIND THE CURTAIN

"We're all about gameplay first, design driven here. So every level, every zone that's built looks like this," says Knight. "It's populated with combat, it's tested, in some cases it's even focused grouped before it gets handed off to the art department. That's a big part of our process that we've stuck to from the beginning and will to the end: designers make something first—fun first—and then we hand it off to the artists to make it pretty. Sounds simple, but a lot of games aren't built that way, but this one is.

The characters have a lot of moves, they really define the space that he's in; we want to get that right first. We built something that looked a lot like this that was fully playable, and we took it to our label president for greenlighting before we ever put one texture on it. You could play it, the audio experience was done, the controller rumbled, the animations were great and it just felt awesome. It tested really well at play test—and all this before we had a single texture built in."



"But you know, it all starts on paper. We have to be able to achieve what's in our minds." —Huang

"It's satisfying to rip the arm off an undead minion, so we've got stuff like that, and you certainly see the brutality evolve throughout the game." -Knight

to the bigger points.

What makes this a gamer's game?

Well it's very mechanic and design driven, so for us, it's imperative the character is fun to control and he's really responsive. He's a total avatar for your controller input. That may sound simple, but a lot of games don't do that. Dante is highly responsive, he does exactly what I want him to do. It's easy to get into, it's not overly complicated, but the better you are, the more the game will give back to you. There's just a lot of layers—which move works well against which enemy, unlocks, the upgrading of the weapons. I didn't want the story or the puzzles or the environments to get in the way of a characters whose simply fun to control.

Feeling is big?

Absolutely. It's number one for sure. There's a lot of old games I grew up with that were arcade games: super addictive because I mashed buttons and awesome stuff happened. Very fast paced, that's the spirit of the game.

A game's "feeling" is maybe a bit nebulous, but you can't deny the command you have of the character is the gateway to the experience. I certainly think your goal of 60fps is big.

The feel, absolutely... Some people... I dunno. Some people think the feel is kind of an intangible, time and time again, when you play it like this, you just don't want to go back. It does make Ash's job a little bit harder [laughs]. It's just one more constraint, and once you put a constraint in place, you know, I always say 60 frames is less of a technology choice. It's just will power. Once you decide you want to do it, then everyone works within those constraints and moves on.

Aggression comes in many forms. How are you bringing that into the game?

Knight: That's tough to answer without giving too much away... I guess what I would say, the game is not about gore for gore sake. It's also, the narrative, the story is a pretty personal thing, what Dante has to face in his own life, the life he has to reckon when he goes to hell is where the emotional impact is, more so than anything gory or physical, it's more what he's done. I think the babies are something we can talk about, that's a good example where the very notion that babies go to hell is simply, we're going: here, we didn't even have to make that up. This is what people believe. Those are the moments that I'm looking for in the game, not blood and guts.

Huang: And you, just the gameplay, how it feels, the sense of the visceral. It is an experience medium, you don't sit back and just soak things in from afar like a movie, so I

think if we can continue to deliver even more on how visceral it feels, those tie ins, like Jonathan says, not just gore for gore's sake, but that feeling, when you use the scythe and you hit something, you feel like you're hitting something. The animation, the feedback, all that gets to you.

Subject matter like this could go so many directions.

It's satisfying to rip the arm off an undead minion, so we've got stuff like that, and you certainly see the brutality evolve throughout the game. You saw him take the head off the demon, we're definitely doing more stuff like that. If there's a satisfying way of killing something, we're gonna go there. But again, I don't think we're trying to be particularly gory. The goal is to make the player feel like they've ripped their way into hell, are ripping things apart to get to Beatrice to save her, get out. So it's violent, but in that sort of fantasy, brutal violence way. And again, we just aren't ready to talk about other levels, but you can expect... the babies are a good example of where we're gonna go with other stuff. Just wait.





Resident Evil

Out of Africa, and into the fire.

words Heather Anne Campbell

"His arms appear as two Christmas hams duct-taped to both sides of an angry two-by-four."





Finally, a little time alone with Resident Evil 5. Sure, I've had the chance to play the game at trade shows and private events, but gaming is something you do in your house (unless we're talking about a portable here), and Resident Evil 5 is one of those titles that benefits from a dark room and a big screen. On a lonely January night, I pulled up my covers, snuggled into the cushions of my couch, and prepared to be unsettled.

Instead, I ended up sweating. Not from fright, but from the intensity of combat. This was not a terrifying game; instead, the simple jitters of Evils previous had been replaced with gun-fire and set pieces. There's still a lot of survival here, but not much in the way of horror. Unless brown textures and gray buildings are the kind of thing you see in your nightmares.

If Resident Evil is cinema's Alien, then Resident Evil 5 is Cameron's follow-up. Imagine the tagline: "Last Time, You Were The Master of Unlocking. This Time, it's War." Our hero Chris Redfield is so beefy that I actually thought my aspect ratio was wrong. His arms appear as two Christmas hams duct-taped to both sides of an angry two-by-four. The thickness of his neck suggests he recently swallowed a tire.

Dropped off in Africa, Chris Redfield immediately teams up with Sheva Alomar to investigate a crisis

that has befallen a military squad. Along the way, he'll expose the origins of the zombie virus that has plagued him since Raccoon City. There's a short section of familiarizing yourself with the controls, getting to know the savage locals (who eye the American interloper with angry white eyes), and then the fight begins.

The pace of the game is reflected in a new set of control schemes. For purists, there's a strict Resident Evil IV setting. More modern gamers can choose from three other options, the final of which bears a loose similarity to Gears of War. Aim and action are your triggers, running is done with the press of a button. And what do you know: Strafing has finally come to Capcom's flagship series.

Since I played the game without a friend, I got the chance to experience Sheva's AI. It's not bad! Moreover, it's adjustable! On the default setting of "Rogue," Sheva Alomar ran off on her own, smashing barrels and collecting ammo, much like a selfish co-player would were you to play the game with a comrade. Finally, gaming has produced a virtual jackass.

Right now, it feels like Resident Evil 4, in Africa. But is that a bad thing? But RE4 ranks as one of the best games of all time—I don't blame Capcom for going the same direction for one more round.

Resident Evil now includes many explosions.





Prototype

Holding out for a hero...

words Matt Cabral



"...great news for players controlling Alex and his torso tearing, limb-lopping, disemboweling powers."

I'm growing bored of all these so-called superheroes whining about their struggles with "power" and "responsibility;" spineless, world-saving-wannabes getting all emo over their newfound powers (I'm lookin' at you *Heroes*.) Boo-friggin'-hoo—quit your bitching, embrace your inhuman abilities, and get out there and kick some ass. Thankfully, Alex Mercer, the much-needed antidote to these prima donna day-savers, arrives this summer, packing a no-holds barred approach to his super heroism. The protagonist of Activision and Radical Entertainment's (*Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*) open-world actioner *Prototype* wakes up on a cold steel slab in a Manhattan morgue, realizes he's been cursed (or blessed) with amazing shape-shifting abilities, and sets off to unravel a deep-running conspiracy involving a humanity-altering infection, violently dealing with anyone who gets in his way—no whining, no weeping on Aunt May's shoulder, just rampant, balls-to-the-wall killing—all because he wants answers and he's going to do whatever it takes to get them.

Of course, this is great news for players controlling Alex and his torso tearing, limb-lopping, disemboweling powers—yeah, the game is gory! With appendages that morph into hammer-like fists, razor-sharp blades, and far-flinging whips, Alex's arms are highly adaptable. At a recent demo, I had the pleasure of witnessing him effortlessly shred his way through swarms of infected humans and military forces, leaving a stomach churning blood-and-guts display in his wake. Also effective (and fun to watch) was his fist-pounding ability that forces a mountain of spikes to erupt from the ground, swiftly impaling all in its path. Less violent, but equally useful, was Alex's ability to reel himself towards a high-flying military chopper; once

inside the cockpit, things did get a bit dicey, though, as the two pilots would certainly tell you...if their brains weren't splattered all over the cockpit glass.

In addition to having a pair of limbs that could double as meat grinders, Alex possesses amazing acrobatic powers—whether he's free falling from a skyscraper, wall climbing, or just hoofing it at super-speed through the streets of NYC, Alex's repertoire would have those Marvel and DC heroes soiling their spandex. When he's not turning baddies into hand puppets or scaling the skyline, Alex is playing it stealthy. His powers allow him to take on other human forms, disguising himself as civilians or military personnel to reach objectives and acquire information. In fact, every time he slips into someone else's skin, he'll access their memories and abilities, unlocking clues and other vital info that'll help him crack the conspiracy. The title's story is driven by Alex's memory consumption through what the developers are calling the "web of intrigue;" the more people Alex consumes, the more the web is fleshed out. Being a sandbox-style game, though, it'll be up to each individual player to decide how deep they want to dig. Through natural game progression they'll unlock about one-third of this conspiracy-riddled web, but scouring every nook and cranny of *Prototype*'s world will fill in the rest of the gaps. It should play similarly to *BioShock*'s narrative, which was pieced together by the various audio logs acquired throughout the campaign.

Also keeping with the open-world formula will be the game's "events," mini-missions that don't have to be completed, but will no doubt add to the experience and your spiking adrenaline. The one I saw demoed involved Alex hijacking a tank and taking out everything in his path, while a clock ticked off 120



seconds. The two minute kill spree—and other similar side missions—keep with Prototype's infectious ability to offer straightforward objectives while appealing to gamer's most primal twitchy impulses. It doesn't hurt that the chaos unfolds in a richly realized Manhattan setting that could make Niko Bellic's stomping grounds look like a sleepy suburb. Seriously, there's a lot going on—scared civilians, hulking infected monsters, persistent military forces—in Prototype's environments, and the screen is frequently filled with chaos. And the fact that the title is the first to fully utilize 7.1 surround sound only ups its ability to immerse you in its frightening world. While the city's detail-oozing streets are filled with life and death, so are our ears, as screams, whizzing bullets, high-tech military hardware, and NPC chatter rock our audio set ups.

Despite my strictly hands-off time with Prototype, it struck me as one of the most promising titles I've seen this year. The over-the-top action, fueled by Alex's morhp-tastic powers, looks to be fast-paced, inventive, and bloodier than most—there's no doubt what rating the ESRB will slap on this one. And even the game's quieter (if you can call them that) disguise-driven moments appear to offer more tension, gameplay variety, and bloodshed than the usual sneak-up-snap-neck formula we see in most stealth scenarios. If the crazy-ass chaos I witnessed during a thirty-minute demo can be sustained through the entirety of a sandbox adventure—a genre that contains more filler than a Twinkie—then Alex Mercer will be teaching those so-called anarchists of Saints Row and GTA a thing or two about tearing a city a new one. I look forward to finding out the frontlines when I hide beneath Mercer's menacing hood this summer.

A little sunscreen goes a long way.



Klonoa

The door to dreams reopens

words Dave Halverson

From my point of view, Klonoa is as magical today as it was back when a game starring an anthropomorph in a baseball cap was as common as a grunt with a rifle is today. The game's original director, Hideo Yoshizawa, together with other key members of the original Door to Phantomile team have done an incredible job of breathing new life into the PlayStation classic, rebuilding it from the ground up utilizing every tool in the Wii arsenal to make its 2.5D "Visions" spring to vivid life. Refinement is evident in nearly every facet of the game, from Klonoa's speed and animation to improved physics and a thorough graphics overhaul. Clean edges have replaced the jaggies of the past, water glistens, smooth surfaces—now subtly textured—shimmer in the light and the game's twisting architecture has been refinished in rich 3D textures that give hard surfaces a luminescent shine or plasticine look. Klonoa looks as reinvigorated as the world around him, bright eyed and ready for action; his long floppy ears now perfectly formed and daintily flowing in the wind. For the uninitiated, Klonoa: Door to Phantomile was among the first in a long line of 2.5D games that introduced 2D gameplay in 3D worlds, such as Tomba! and Tomba! 2, NIGHTS into Dreams, Wario World, and Yoshi's Story. Fairly standard for the time and fun to this day, levels adorned with fountain-like jets of water, swirling tornadoes, and spring boards put Klonoa through his platforming paces while





"Klonoa looks as reinvigorated as the world around him, bright eyed and ready for action..."

3D trolley rides and micro-challenges that require perfect timing, added just enough variety to the gameplay. The true measure of any such game back when simple action games ruled the day was its hook, and Klonoa's was something special.

Using a ring that fires a burst of air called a Wind Bullet, Klonoa is able to pluck creatures (that exist for no other apparent reason) from the ground and sky to throw or thrust downward, flipping switches or other creative cause-and-effect triggers to unravel the game's environmental puzzles, or attack whatever the strange Jester-like character Joka throws in his way. Although the real bad guy is Ghadius, a dark spirit who aims to plunge the dream world of Phantomile into a permanent nightmare.

It's all very whimsical—if not a tad bizarre—and dare I say cute, right down to Hewpoe, the funny little floating sphere that accompanies Klonoa on his journey. And therein lies the potential glitch in the matrix.

The more I play the new Door to Phantomile remake the harder it is to figure out where it fits in the current equation. By today's E-rated game standards Klonoa would rank somewhere between a soft E and a 3+ in terms of character and world design and it's a bit on the short and easy side, although I'm pretty sure that Namco Bandai is working on additional content to lengthen our stay. I just hope that there's a big enough audience out there to do a US release justice, between kids willing to play a non-violent game and any PlayStation-era gamers who own a Wii. I can't remember the last time I saw a non-Nintendo or Guitar-based Wii game anywhere near the top-ten, but if anyone can do it, it's Namco Bandai; still keeping it real after all these years.





words Brady Fiechter

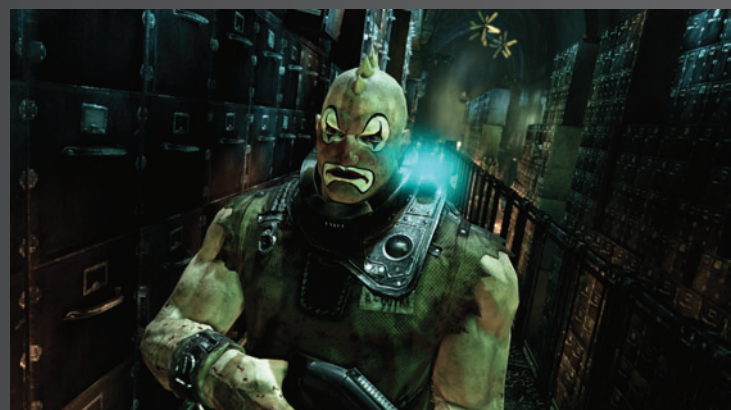
The Joker has been a bad, bad boy. In the opening of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, the cancer of Gotham is being guided to a holding cell, chained nice and tight to an upright gurney. His ultimate crime is not yet clear: a lovely researcher named Dr. Young has been creating a nasty little formula that can transform ordinary beings into bizarre, Hulk-like lunatics, and wouldn't you know it, the Joker has secretly leached his influences into the project.

This brings us to the halls of *Arkham Asylum*, where all the freaks of Gotham hang out in their cages and await that special healing touch from the resident mental docs. Liberties have been taken in the game to play around with the familiar Batman universe faces, using the experiment-gone-awry narrative to introduce new villains and beef up old ones, like Killer

Croc, who's represented here as a brute of a monster. Where there's the Joker, villains, minions and shit hitting the fan, there's Batman to the rescue. True to the history of the comic-book, Batman is no killer. Your task in the game is to incapacitate and discover, using gadgets and hand-to-hand combat—as many as 15 enemies will come at you at once—to cut through the opposition and further your passage through the depths of *Arkham Asylum*. The game takes place over a single night, using the backdrop of the island setting for internal and external conflicts. The loony bin is a character in its own right.

The game runs off a theme of exploration, investigation, combat, and stealth. A forensic system and X-ray ability offer Batman the tools to uncover the smaller details in the world and prepare for more strategically-waged enemy

"Batman is being painted as a figure of fear, turning the stealth structure into a predatory affair..."





THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK ASSAULT ON DARK ATHENA

You're not afraid of the dark, are you?

words Evan Shamoon

The first chapter in the Chronicles of Riddick saga, titled *Escape From Butcher Bay*, was a groundbreaking experience when first released for Xbox in 2004. One of the most ambitious adventures of its era, the game managed to separate itself from the rest of the first-person pack by bringing a slower-paced, more considered approach to first-person gaming; though guns were a major component of the game, players were often left with nothing but their fists, their wits, and a whole lot of shadows in which to hide. The game's lighting and pervasive use of graphical effects (like the now-commonplace normal mapping) gave it a unique atmosphere, as did the way it necessitated the player using his or her environment to dramatic effect.

Now, Swedish developer Starbreeze Studios continues apace on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Initially conceived as a remake of the Xbox original, *Assault on Dark Athena* has since become its own beast. It begins in space with the titular Riddick—once again played by Vin Diesel (who, it should be noted, is the founder of Tigon Studios, the production company behind the game)—and his ship being captured by a larger vessel. Riddick manages to hide himself during the initial detainment, and quickly finds himself aboard a particularly unpleasant space cruise. Once again, you'll find yourself engaging in fisticuffs and lurking in the shadows to survive. The combat has been

"Once again, you'll find yourself engaging in fisticuffs and lurking in the shadows to survive."



tuned quite nicely, with a noticeable improvement upon the original's already beefy, powerful physical dealings. Also expect: outsmarting robot sentries, dragging around bodies, and voiceover at a lower pitch than even Christian Bale's *Dark Knight*.

Dark Athena also brings 12-player online multiplayer to the table, recalling the arena-style combat made popular by such franchises as *Quake* and *Unreal Tournament*. It's all very *Running Man*, with an excited color commentator covering the action and frantic, over-the-

top action taking the stage. Expect old-school environments—corridors dominate the multiplayer landscape, very much mirroring the types of location found in the single-player game. The modes, however, are novel: Team deathmatch puts prisoners against guards in a series of large levels, while Pitch Black has six players controlling well-equipped soldiers, and one the role of Riddick...with only his blades to defend himself. Riddick can see in the dark, however, while the guards must use flashlights to find him.





"Watchmen delivers as both a stand-alone brawler and a precursor to the film, especially considering the price tag."

words Dave Halverson

Let's pretend for a minute that there is no Watchmen graphic novel (yeah, I know, the horror right?) and that this game just dropped into the XBLA queue out of sheer imagination. That way I can speak of it without treading on what many consider a graphic novel so exalted that until recently most believed it could never be captured on film. On that note I remember sitting in the theatre completely awestruck after 300, realizing that filmmaking as we knew it had just changed before my eyes, wondering what Zack Snyder would do next. "Can't be done" turned into "That guy can do it" there and then and now Watchmen is a tent pole summer blockbuster. Who'd of ever think it? But for now, that didn't happen.

The first thing that popped into my mind embarking on The End is Nigh is how utterly amazing it looks for an XBLA

game. "This is a ten dollar game?" I thought. Must be about 40 minutes long... Try more like 4 to 5 hours long depending on your fisticuffs and considering the two playable characters double that. Hot damn! Well, hot damn if you're in the mood for a brutal Nixon-era arcade style beat 'em up featuring a Batman wannabe (or is it the other way around?) and a cross between Kato from the Green Hornet and Charles Bronson who walks around with his hands in his pockets. Viewed purely as a downloadable 6-chapter arcade-style brawler, you simply cannot go wrong with Watchmen. Regardless of which character you select, it's all about cleaning up scum (vermin, whatever) by chaining together heavy or fast attacks and performing throws, counters, and knock downs (just follow the button trails) with an emphasis on brutality. Playing as Rorschach, Extra Damage Combos and Vicious Blows produce brutal slow-motion finishing moves and once his Rage Meter fills, watch out. This guy has serious issues. He doesn't just kill vermin, he goes completely postal. Nite Owl's okay too, especially for a straight man. No Rage Meter, but he's a lot faster (the game takes half the time playing as Nite-Owl; Rorschach likes to walk), uses mainly martial arts moves and in place of Rage the Owlsuit provides handy tools like screecher grenades and the grapple gun (when prompted). Okay, geek hats back on please.

What sets The End is Nigh apart from other straight brawlers is the real-time graphic novel based on the greatest graphic novel of all time (there, I said it) that ties it all together with dialogue that's both smart and well produced. I can't say that I'm in love with the art style but it's a nice piece of work.

Watchmen delivers as both a stand-alone brawler and a precursor to the film,



especially considering the price tag. I'd easily pay \$19.95 or more for an arcade game this art-soaked at a brick and mortar. Some of these set pieces are truly inspired. If I have one complaint, and I do, it's using the left analog stick for both vertical and horizontal movement. I much prefer moving my character independently of the background and operating the camera myself via the right

analog. I understand the choice; I often hear people complain about "cameras" (apparently their right analog sticks are all broken) so WB games lumps it all into the one directional. A small price to pay for such a great excuse to crack some heads. I wouldn't mind a follow-up featuring Silk Spectre and Dr. Manhattan. C'mon, you know it's coming.



Ghostbusters

Are you a God? Then...PLAY!

words Matt Cabral



...Needs some suspension work and shocks. Brakes, brake pads, lining, steering box, transmission, rear-end.
...Only \$4800. Also new rings, mufflers, a little wiring. Also new rings, mufflers, a little wiring.

"...this is an authentic Ghostbusters' experience all the way."

I've had the good fortune of strapping on the proton pack twice in Atari's Ghostbusters, and both times I've left the experience wondering: "What the hell was Activision thinking?" I understand it's not a Guitar Hero-like money-printing property, but it only takes reeling in that first ghoul to realize the franchise is far from a risk. Oh well, better get cracking on the next Tony Hawk title, Activision.

Now, back to ghost wrangling. Playing as a rookie spook-slayer, that's exactly what you'll do; and just like in the films, it's a science that requires some definite skill. The three step process—stunning, reeling, and trapping—will feel new to third-person action fans accustomed to felling foes with a well-placed headshot. But the process is a blast, not to mention super satisfying once you learn to put those spectral suckers in their

the addictive ghost hunting gameplay might have you humming Ray Parker Jr.'s biggest hit, but it's the presentation that'll grab you like a ghoulie (sorry, couldn't resist the Rare shout-out). From the amazing likenesses of the cast to proton packs that look as though they were snagged from the original film's prop closet, this is an authentic Ghostbusters' experience all the way. Oh, and just wait until you face off against the librarian and her projectile reading material in a boss encounter that's as easy on the eyes as it is taxing on the reflexes. It's no wonder the movie's cast considers this the official third installment of the film franchise.

Speaking of the gray jump-suited band of busters, their participation in the project—Ramis and Aykroyd wrote the script—is also a welcome, authenticity-nailing addition. Since you don't play as one of the original Ghostbusters, they're free to let the comedic banter fly. And just listening to them exchange quips and compare geeky ghost notes is a fan-pleasing hoot that'll take you right back to 1984.

As slick as the current-gen version is, it'll likely be the Wii release that recruits the most busters. Rather than watering down the technically superior SKUs, the developers are taking a welcome no-port approach, creating an original look that's less realistic but equally appealing in its caricature-like charm. Additionally, using the Wii-mote to trap with the proton pack and track with the PKE meter is an immersion-pushing highlight—you'll see when you toss out a trap with an underhand flick of the nunchuck, just before whipping down the Wii-mote to close the deal on capturing an unruly frightener. All this, and the Wii version also adds the option to play as a female Ghostbuster, and supports split-screen co-op. Take that, next-gen!

Regardless of your platform of choice, though, there's little doubt we'll be seeing a whole new generation of Ghostbusters, not to mention the nostalgia-loving oldies like me, suiting-up to save New York City from the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man when this beloved property finally gets the game it deserves this summer.



place. Making things easier are powerful but limited-ammo options that supplement the reliable energy streams; there's nothing like a flurry of boson darts to remind a slimer you mean business. Be careful, though, as firing on all cylinders for too long will overheat your pack. Although, it's totally worth doing this intentionally now and then, just to witness the cool steam spitting, component-discharging effects.

You don't have to break your gear, though, to enjoy the sights, as the game piles the eye candy high, packing graphical tricks and treats around every bend. Sure,



System: PS3 | Developer: Sony Austin | Publisher: SOE | Available: TBA

DC Universe Online

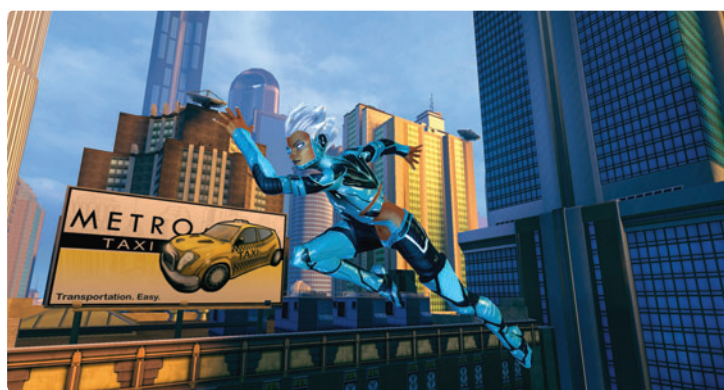
Be your own Dark Knight

In 2004 MMORPG fans were given the opportunity to customize their very own crime fighters in *City of Heroes*, a title that continues to fulfill the fantasies of the cape-wearing crowd. While I always appreciated this series' authentic comic book vibe, I felt its lack of classic characters robbed it of real superhero street cred; no matter how cool Paragon City's populace, they were still no match for the Marvel and DC icons we grew up with. Thankfully, Sony Online Entertainment is swooping in to save the day with *DC Universe Online*, a simi-

larly spandex-drenched experience that adds DC's legendary line-up of heroes and villains to the mix.

Armchair world-savers and evildoers will still customize their own characters and carve their own path, but their adventures unfold in classic canon locales like Gotham City and Metropolis, so a visit to the Batcave or the Daily Planet may just be a few key strokes away. Additionally, DCUO's fresh-faced heroes will get the chance to fight alongside the likes of Superman, while baddies-in-training will no doubt want to join the Joker in terrorizing Gotham. My recent time with the

title saw one of SOE's developers supporting Supes in a battle with Doomsday. As the dev's personalized female ninja—complete with sexy she-hero costume and dual blade-wielding skills—held back an army of henchmen, the Man of Steel faced the hulking beast, eventually felling him with effective (and visually impressive) frost breath and eye beam powers. The battle was just a taste of what DCUO is packing in its utility belt, but its balanced use of player-made characters and DC legends had me eager to forge my very own good or evil path in its storied universe. **Matt Cabral**

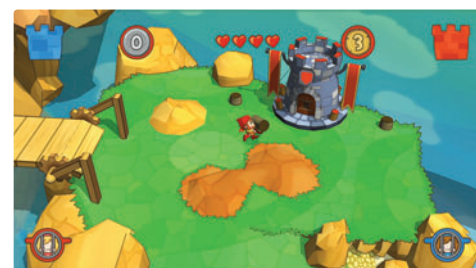


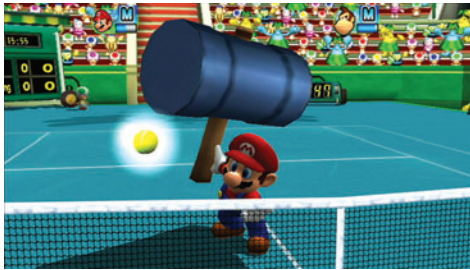
Fat Princess

Capture the fattie

After a stellar year of exclusive Xbox Live Arcade titles, lead by *Braid* and *Castle Crashers*, it would seem the PlayStation Network has some catching up to do. Gamers are flocking to these increasingly popular options, as they defy traditional categorization by reinventing what we thought games were all about, while also putting much smaller dents in our wallets. Wasting no time, Sony's already kicked off 2009 with the inspired *Flower*, and now they're preparing to drop *Fat Princess* on us (pun totally intended.) Sporting charming cartoon-like visuals and a comedic vibe, the PSN multiplayer-focused exclusive's feature list will seem very familiar at first; up to 32 players (16 per side in competitive team play) choose a class—mage, priest, warrior, worker, archer—and participate in modes like team deathmatch and capture the flag on a variety of maps.

It all seems pretty been-there-done-that till you realize the "flag" is actually the princess, and her titular obesity serves as much more than just a fun-poking game title. You see, the main objective involves rescuing your princess—she begins each game a captive in your opponents' camp—but doing so is made difficult by the fact your enemies are fattening her up, force-feeding her cake, cookies, and other belly-expanding sweets; the fatter she gets, the more players it takes to carry her. This inventive and potentially controversy-fueling concept is further driven by the strategy-focused ability to change classes mid-game; simply switch class hats, and voila, you now have new abilities. This game-changing mechanic, combined with the title's endearing presentation and interesting take on royalty's eating habits, should have PSN fans feasting on *Fat Princess* when it arrives later this year.. **Matt Cabral**





System: Wii | Developer: Camelot Software Planning | Publisher: Nintendo | Available: March

New Play Control! Mario Power Tennis

In with the old...

One could go on for quite a length about the various virtues or not of Nintendo recycling Gamecube games on the Wii. On the one hand, what a quick buck they must be planning on making! On the other hand, with games like Pikmin and Mario Power Tennis on the docket, it's tough to complain with a smile on one's face.

Here we're looking at Mario Power Tennis, and this is a game that I played a lot on Gamecube with friends. Made by Camelot Software Planning, it's a terrific, fast-paced action sports game with tight control, simple yet satisfying play, and a wealth of multiplayer modes. And let's not forget the

seemingly endless appeal of Nintendo characters.

So it remains with this Wii version with updated controls using a combination of side-to-side swipes and various over-and under-hand strokes with the Wii-mote. Players can use the Nunchuck to move the characters about, or engage in a more basic-mode that uses only the wand and d-pad. Obviously it took a few games to get used to the new scheme but I quickly felt at home swinging away and the game was doing a good job of registering my various control movements. Is it better playing this way? You'll have to read the future review to find that out. But I'll leave you with this: It's not worse! **Mike Hobbs**



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REVIEWS



Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: Since we're about to launch the new more webilicious Play site I'll be changing my review tactics accordingly. From now on I'll be playing each game for at least 15 minutes (or until the on-screen prompts run out) then surfing the many forums frequented by cranky born-to-bitch ungamers to see how much profanity they're throwing at it, and then finally add or subtract 10% based on how much free stuff I'm getting (or not) from the publisher. Either that or just give everything a 5 or lower so I can hang out in the hater forums. Those guys are wicked cool man! **Brain Drain:** For me EGM died when Steve Harris sold it to ZD, but it was still a big part of my early days as a gamer and I always considered it the staple of US game magazines. They liked what we didn't and vice-versa, so it was a good balance too. I wish them all well.

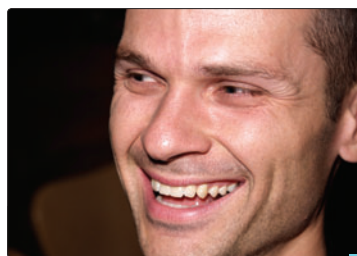
Game of the Month: X-Blades (They would have hammered this one.)



Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe videogames can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** Klonoa fans, get thee to the following URL: http://www.survey-monkey.com/s.aspx?sm=2qr8Hf0wgsGpd4_2f0Yk6kFQ_3d_3d. Namco Bandai USA is holding a survey that points to an American release for the Wii Klonoa (awright!), but they're also considering ruining his character design (ugh).

Game of the Month: Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia



Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).

Brain Drain: I really wish the industry didn't put so much emphasis on previewing games with misguided abandon, especially when a game like Killzone 2 has been making the rounds for months. Expectations get shot so high good games sometimes get lost in the aftermath. Regardless, Killzone 2, go enjoy.

Game of the Month: Killzone 2



Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.

Brain Drain: 2009 may be the year that the game industry successfully pushes the envelope a little bit farther in terms of adult content. I'm not eager to see hardcore Wii pornography or anything, but there's no reason that the content allowed in M-rated games shouldn't correspond to what's allowed in R-rated movies, especially when the average Xbox 360/PS3 owner is well into adulthood.

Game of the Month: F.E.A.R. 2



Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!

Brain Drain: All apologies to the folks at Bethesda for my criticisms for Fallout 3. I really love the game, you see, but it's badly, nay, horribly broken.

Game of the Month: Left 4 Dead



Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked. **Brain Drain:** Even if they were technically a competitor, and even if sometimes I vehemently disagreed with them, the loss of EGM is truly that: a loss. I still remember pouring over every detail of their massive CES issues, or sending them a nasty letter when they trashed my other favorite magazine (GameFan). Good luck to all of the folks from EGM and 1up wherever they end up. **Game of the Month:** House of the Dead: Overkill



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me...

Brain Drain: When Valve finally patched Left 4 Dead, the first thing my team did was confirm that the exploits were, in fact, removed; then we discovered 2 new safe spots not accounted for, and we celebrated and laughed, as if "sticking it to the man"—not because we actually needed to cheat. Zimbardo was right about situational forces making monsters out of decent men!

Game of the Month: You Have To Burn The Rope



Heather Campbell
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

Brain Drain: So, Benjamin Button was terrible. So was Milk. Man on Wire (finally available on Netflix for Xbox Live) was a disappointment. The best film I've seen lately is Red Cliff, and that movie is more than a little silly throughout. If it weren't for Battlestar Galactica, I think I'd be ready to give up non-interactive media.

Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV

LIT

See, Mom; I TOLD you my teacher was a demon

words Eric L. Patterson

Two genres I take very seriously are survival horror and puzzle games, and both have had a long history of complimenting one another, from the era of *Alone in the Dark* and 7th Guest up to present-day examples like the *Silent Hill* series. So, when told that WayForward's first WiiWare project was a sort of "survival horror/puzzle" title, it's only natural that I was intrigued.

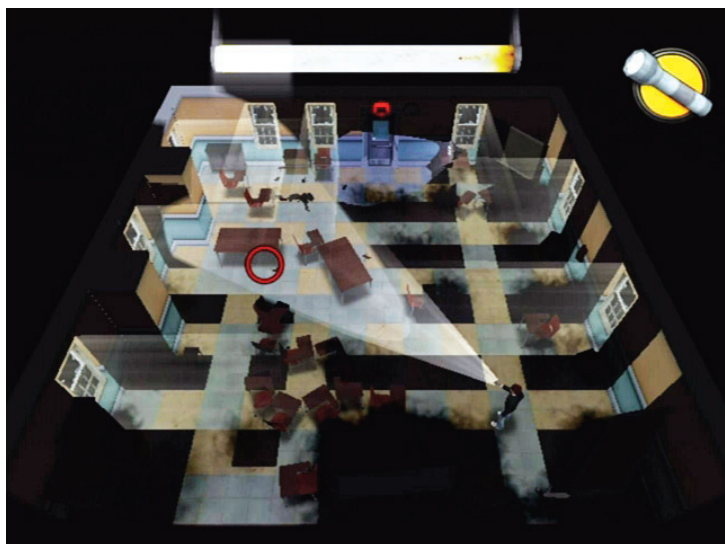
LIT is the kind of game that services like WiiWare are made for: titles that provide an interesting concept but maybe aren't quite large enough in scope to be expanded into \$60 retail copies. The idea here is the balance between light and dark, and that age-old rule that the barrier separating the two is the fine line between life and death.

Main hero Jake (who looks to be fresh from a Hawthorne Heights concert) finds himself trapped in a macabre version of his high school, and salvation will only come if he can navigate the puzzles (and monsters) presented to him throughout the building's thirty rooms. Each room starts off the same: pitch black with the exception of the soft glow of light coming in through the window of the door he just used to enter. Your goal is simple: find a way to light a path from the entrance of the room to its exit

without ever setting foot into an unlit area. The challenge, of course, comes from the not-so-simple execution of that idea.

One of LIT's major strengths is that the solution you need in each room doesn't always come easy, but it does come—so long as you take a moment to study your surroundings and give thought to how you should proceed. Some puzzle games rely on abstract situations that at times are more easily

"...sort of a 'survival horror/puzzle' title—it's only natural that I was intrigued."



solved simply through brute-force trial and error; in contrast, all of the items LIT offers you for use along the way are logical (and obvious) in function. So, while the challenges may be, well, challenging, they are never unfair or nonsensical.

Another thing to appreciate about LIT is an attempt to give the game a bit more depth than is initially apparent. While I won't spoil it for you, there's an element to the main "Light" mode that helps flesh out the story, so long as you put out some extra effort. LIT also includes a time trial-esque "Dark" mode, where you can re-run unlocked rooms to see if you can escape before your gradually dimming light is completely snuffed out.

Though you may find yourself wishing LIT had been a tad bit longer once you've seen and done all there is to do, that will be because it's such

Be VERY afraid of the dark.

an entertaining experience during the entirety of what it does have to offer. If you enjoy challenging your brain (in the old fashion, non-"training" way) and are looking for something new, find some way to clear enough space on your Wii to download LIT.

I guess you can consider that step your first official challenge to overcome. Sadly, it may actually be the hardest.

parting shot

Just as in my childhood, LIT taught me a cruel lesson in how much my skills at avoiding the wrath of a hurled dodgeball suck.

F.E.A.R. 2

Project Origins

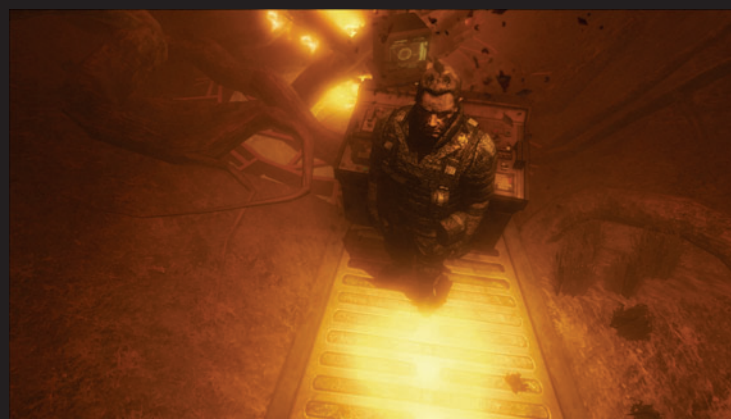
The only thing you have to fear is fear itself

words Casey Loe

Here are two ways to look at a game like F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin. As a shooter to rival its Killzone and Call of Duty peers, it's something of a disappointment, with middling tech and generally derivative mechanics. But when viewed through the lens of the narrative-driven survival horror genre, F.E.A.R. 2 suddenly looks a whole lot better. With an engrossing story, a more exploration-focused structure, and environments packed with rich and disturbing details, it isn't hard to see F.E.A.R. 2 as being more of a contemporary to the Silent Hill and Siren

series. And who could possibly complain about the lame whack-a-zombie combat of those games being replaced with rock-solid FPS battles?

Now, let's not take the comparison too far. F.E.A.R. 2 is a thoroughly linear game, devoid of puzzles, conversation trees and the like. But it is a rare FPS with the courage to take a break from the action and offer long stretches of quiet exploration. While the game seems a little primitive on a technical level, with limited lighting effects and intermittent slowdown, the artistry in some of its environments is top notch. Set pieces like a nuked city filled with smoldering buses and a crashed airliner leave a

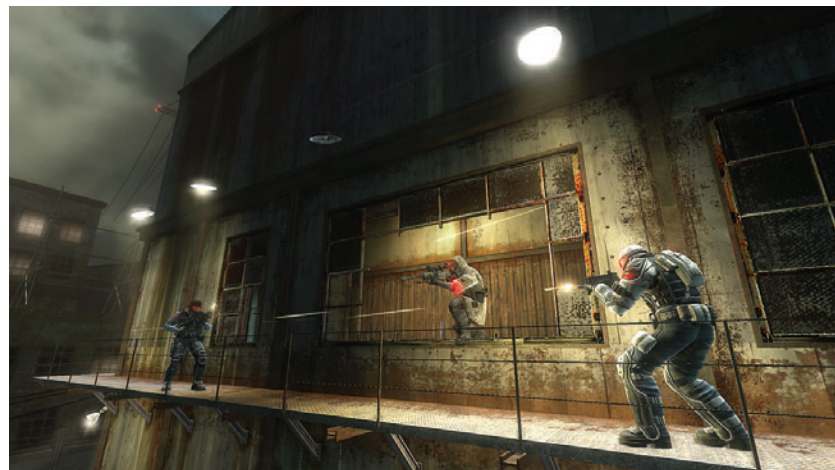


powerful impression, and the tiny details in the creepy elementary school show months of effort packed into locations that players are free to blow through in minutes.

The environments in F.E.A.R. 2 are important, because they have to handle the bulk of the storytelling. The game is mercifully light on cutscenes, but manages to tell a strong story through background details and fully interactive scripted events; you never know when you'll turn the corner to see a key character being executed by an

Armacham soldier, or find yourself in the center of an enigmatic waking dream. Like the original F.E.A.R., Project Origin will probably draw criticism for not being particularly scary, but I don't think true horror was ever the developer's intention. This is more of an X-Files/Fringe, edge-of-your-seat, WTF-is-going-on style of suspense, and while it has plenty of blood, it relies more on half-glimpsed horrors and enigmatic imagery than piles of corpses and jump-out-at-you shocks. The story it tells is a good one, flowing smoothly from

"The environments in F.E.A.R. 2 are important, because they have to handle the bulk of the storytelling."





scene to scene and answering most of the questions it raises in a clear and coherent way. That's a big improvement over the original F.E.A.R., in which you had to piece together scraps of written intel to get any solid answers.

While I'm impressed with the world of F.E.A.R. 2 and the story it tells, its core shooting gameplay merits little more than a shrug and a half-hearted thumbs-up. In its early chapters, the combat feels painfully generic, with every gun, enemy and combat situation reminding me of other, better games. The new cover mechanic (in which you make cover by overturning objects) doesn't amount to much, since the hero's time-slowing ability and aggressive enemy tactics encourage you to stay moving instead of holding a position. The series' fabled AI does do some interesting things at the squad level, using flanking tactics and showing a great deal of flexibility in responding to player actions.

But on an individual level, you still have soldiers who cling to ineffective cover even after they've been shot repeatedly, and enemies throwing grenades into solid objects that bounce them right back to the thrower.

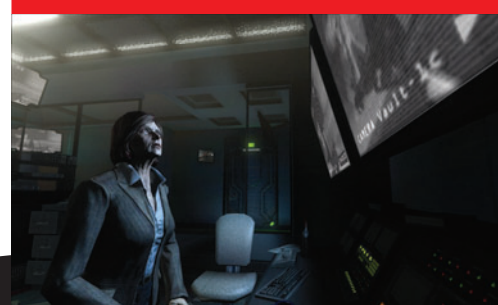
As the campaign progresses, some much-needed variety seeps in, in the form of non-human enemies with paranormal abilities, and powerful combat suits known as EPAs. After facing them a few times as boss encounters, you're given the opportunity to pilot an EPA yourself, and the absolute carnage you can wreak offers a joyous respite from the usual soldier-on-soldier warfare. But while F.E.A.R. 2 offered enough variety to keep me engrossed in its 8-10 hour campaign, there's nothing fresh or interesting enough about its combat system to lure me into the game's online competitive multiplayer modes. (I'd have given them a shot anyway, but we weren't able to

schedule a multiplayer session in time for this review.) For those who primarily do their shooting solo, however, F.E.A.R. 2's rare combination of strong storytelling, original settings and satisfying action add up to one of the most engrossing single-player campaigns of recent years.

parting shot



Though F.E.A.R. 2 may not be a Call of Duty killer, it certainly puts a few bullets into the conventional model of horror-game design. While other series justify clumsy controls as an attempt to make the player feel scared and powerless, F.E.A.R. 2 proves that you can enjoy a richly suspenseful horror-game experience... and still kick ass.





As a rule when a 10-foot-tall ancient god-beast tells you not to touch his orb, it's a good idea to heed his words, but that doesn't stop Gaijin Entertainment's mall-rat-cum-treasure hunter exhibitionist, Ayumi, from snatching it up and absorbing its cursed dark power in the process. And so a-hacking, slashing, and shooting she goes, searching for a way to lift the curse, and with a little luck, make it to the sequel. Ayumi may not come across like your everyday treasure hunter but don't let her valley-girl demeanor fool you. She's just about everything you could ask for in a heroine: fast, nimble, deadly with a pair of Gunblades, and thanks to the orb, a wicked spell caster that can transform her gorgeous body into a vessel of dark rage. Speaking of her body, I'm sure you've noticed that Ayumi wears dental floss for underwear and likes to do battle dressed in as little clothing as possible. Makes you wonder whether or not there's much of a game behind all that fan service, but I can assure you, if it's lavish visuals and monster slaying you're after, you can't do better than X-Blades. The eye candy—and she's just the beginning—is a bonus.

X-Blades

Undressed to kill

words Dave Halverson



Although the crux of X-Blades' gameplay is simple room clearing it's produced on an epic scale with a level of detail and polish befitting far more high-profile (and expensive) games. Not only does the game look different, it feels absolutely foreign (because it is) *beginning* with a boss battle and then never letting up. From the moment you set foot into the first ruin the enemy AI is set on "chase and kill Ayumi." It's jarring at first but you'll soon find that there's a method to Gaijin's madness. It's just nothing like the heavily produced games we've become accustomed to. As Ayumi eliminates monsters and destroys various relics (if it breaks, break it), she absorbs souls that act as the game's currency to acquire and bind spells, purchase items, and upgrade her guns and bullets as you piece together the necessary artifacts. To facilitate the exploration component, once an area is cleared and the barrier to the next ruin is down, you're free to explore. And it's a good thing because not only is exploration key but this is a world begging to be taken in. The creatures and bosses are unlike anything you've probably ever seen; and the game practically is a special effect.

Before long Ayumi's Gunblades (and body) become pyrotechnic marvels wielding fire, ice, and thunder. There's a new costume to unearth too, and be on the lookout for scrolls that temporarily slash prices, yet another strange aspect of the game. There's no rhyme or reason to the cost of goods in X-Blades. The first few spells range from a few hundred to a few thousand souls, and then the next thing you know you need 300,000 which seems impossible...

until you start to see millions. Once again however it all works out. I've got 5 million on me right now and I just bought the Ray of Light. Hey, only 4 million more for the Flash of Light! Success or failure relies on knowing what spells to bind, bullets to use, and attacks to wield as each new creation writes its way into Ayumi's Bestiary (consult it often). Midway through the game when five or six enemy-types are coming at you from all angles, swirling in the air, charging on the ground and firing from afar simultaneously you need to transition between spells without hesitation. Fortunately, Gaijin puts as much thought into the control scheme as they did everything else, assigning jumping and slashing to A and X respectively (as it should be), shooting to RT (with the four bullet-types on the D-Pad), Lock-on to LT, and binding magic to the remaining four buttons for seamless transitions between various attacks and spells. Not that it matters all that much if you fail. Loading is practically non-existent and there's no monetary penalty or ground lost. You go back to the beginning of the area and everything re-spawns, but any gained experience or souls are yours to keep.

Possible hitches lie in the game's difficulty (but only well into the later stages, and not as far as I'm concerned) and Ayumi's floaty jump, which is great for assailing hard to reach perches (the game has ample—although

"Give me inspired level and character design, fun sticky gameplay, cutting-edge visuals and a soundtrack to drive it all home and I'm good."



mostly voluntary—platforming) and annihilating airborne enemies, but troublesome when you're trying to escape an overpowering horde of Pangolin Sorcerers or Pangos—fidgety little creatures that are all teeth and like to attack in large numbers. Once you attain the Teleportation spell, which instantly shifts you out of harm's way, the problem is solved but it bears mentioning...I guess. Ayumi's inflection is the only real fly in the ointment but thankfully she doesn't speak all that much. X-Blades' story serves more as a rationale to eliminate monsters than anything approaching substance (Gaijin reaches for something a bit deeper but

it never really materializes) but I've got a stack of RPGs to finish if I want a story.

When it comes to action gaming I'm a one-trick pony kinda' guy. Give me inspired level and character design, fun sticky gameplay, cutting-edge visuals and a soundtrack to drive it all home and I'm good. In addition to Ayumi's exemplary animation which includes separate frames for walking, running and all out sprinting she changes direction on a dime, and once she's locked-on to a target regardless of the direction she's facing or whether she's standing still or at a full sprint her guns stay fixed and firing, and when not locked on, by simply looking up, her reticule (which looks like something off a Ouija board) will immediately default to the closest threat. She's also dynamic to every angle and step under her feet and looks around inquisitively with her independently moving eyes and head whenever she's idle. Like the game that unfolds around her, Ayumi is all show, and all go.

parting shot



Parting Shot: X-Blades feels like more than the sum of its parts. Ayumi is amazing to behold, for obvious reasons, but also for her spectacular animation and the coolest boots ever, and the game world is wonderfully devised and stuffed with effects. The overall presentation is decidedly epic for a straightforward action game and there's enough depth in the combat to keep you busy for the long haul. It's not for everybody, and the AI is completely frenetic, but if you're an action gamer hungry for a heroine with staying power, say hello to your new best friend.



Street Fighter

Capcom counts to awesome

words Heather Anne Campbell

This game is great. It was my game of the year last year, and will most likely top my list again in 2009. I love fighting games. I love the snap of a good engine. Capcom has produced a slow moving, somewhat deliberate fighter with a low bar of entry for newcomers, while providing long-term players with a core mechanic (the Focus Attack) that can be exploited for a diverse set of play styles. There's a game here for technical players, and enough flexibility for mind games. I love the way the characters move; the curve and arc of their blows makes the game feel alive, even as it clips along with two-dimensional crunch.

Any complaints I have about it are not to be read as disappointments, but as criticism. They are difficult to make, but are necessary.

Street Fighter IV is a collection of old fetishes, polished till they give off a twenty-four carat shine. It's fan service; cheap and manipulative. The game is weighed down by nostalgia, stuck in the swamp of yesterday. They say when dynasties become preoccupied with the past, their cultures shackled by sentimentality, that it signals the end of the empire. If this is so, then Street Fighter IV may be an epitaph for fighting games, as the game's roster and its mechanics are chiseled into the stone of

the genre with decade-old tools. But my god, what a set a knives. What a clamor this game makes. What an attempt. If Casual Gaming is closing in like the dirty walls of a trash compactor, then at least Street Fighter IV gave us one last fight before the compression crushed us all. Before we all were forced to play games by shaking a Wiimote or balancing on one leg. At least Street Fighter IV left some claw marks.

It tries to be everything: a hardcore fighting game that kids can laugh at; a breezy brawler with combos for pros. It gets farther than any fighter before it in its attempt to marry its divergent audiences. Hell, even though I've seen most of these faces before, they've got enough new moves up their gis to keep me riveted.

If the arcade game feels complete, then Street Fighter IV for home systems is perfection plus one. The game is mercilessly quick with you install it to your hard drive. Network/Live play is available during one-player mode (one of the most thrilling moments of my review came when the screen filled with "A New Warrior Has Entered the Ring!" and I played my first online versus match... and won). There weren't enough fellow journalists online to get a real sense of the lag, but the few matches I did

"They say when dynasties become preoccupied with the past, their cultures shackled by sentimentality, that it signals the end of the empire."

get seemed responsive. Of course, the game's real success depends on its online potency...and only time will tell if thousands of Street Fighters will bring game-play to a stuttering halt.

The disc itself offers everything I've wanted in a fighting game; the attention to detail we saw in Super Street Fighter II HD Remix is present in IV, and may even be outdone by the latter title's options and unlockables. Personal stats are robust and detailed. The training mode lets players hone their combos with tangible goals. The challenge mode forces combatants outside of their comfort zones, which provides us with a larger vocabulary of styles when we re-enter the ring.

Let me shout praise at the ability to toggle individual voices between Japanese and English. Ryu in Japanese, Guile speaking like a California grunt. Awesome. Something I've always wanted, but figured was too geeky a demand.

The animated intros and endings are stiff, but it's hard to bemoan something so supplemental. I like the silly little stories. It's not why I play the game, but I don't mind that they exist. And of course, there are a large number of extra characters to unlock, including a personal favorite: Rose.

My disappointment with the game is extremely limited. In fact, it is only because of the fever of my approval that I've forced myself to take a step back and find flaws in Four's successes. This game is gorgeous, and made all the better with a good opponent. So, who's ready for a fight?

parting shot

I wanted this review to just be the words STREET FIGHTER IV over and over again, but my editor said it may not have been the best way to articulate my satisfaction with the game.



In celebration of Street Fighter IV's release, **Play** got in touch with a few members of the original TEAM USA—those Street Fighter fanatics who were part of the EVO Tournament scene in the late 1990s, and competed against Japan in a well-publicised match—to get their thoughts on versus games, arcades, and Street Fighter IV. Here's what they had to say.

play: Do you still play Street Fighter II? How often?

Seth Killian: I play SSF2T HD Remix and plain-old Super Turbo regularly. At least 1-2 times per week for a few hours—more when I can make the time.

Hsien Chang: Nope.

John Choi: Yes, about five hours a week.

Mike Watts: I rarely get a chance to play Street Fighter period. I usually try to play about one month prior to EVO and hopefully three times a week during that period.

What game do you find yourself playing most these days?

Seth Killian: SF HD Remix. The online makes it actually fun to play Street Fighter at home, though I do still go to arcades. I also play a bunch of other games, but I always come back to Street Fighter—it's the love of my life.

Hsien Chang: Street Fighter 4, BlazBlue, Street Fighter 3: Third Strike.

John Choi: SF HD Remix

Mike Watts: I have been fortunate to be able to play Super Turbo [with a lot of players] lately, including John Choi on his recent visit. I also played HD Remix with Mrwizard and Sicdic a couple times in the past few months. In a rare case, I went to Gerald Abraham's

home for a UFC gathering with Jeff Schaefer and had a chance to squeeze in a few games with both of them and some other old school players including George Ngo and Thierry.

What are your initial impressions of Street Fighter IV?

Seth Killian: Well, I've been seeing SFIV since the beginning [Seth is credited as a Special Advisor for Street Fighter IV, and is employed at Capcom], so I've had a lot of impressions, but I'm definitely pumped about the way it's turned out. A lot of love went into its creation. It's a beautiful game to look at and still fires up the same great feeling that has made SFII so magical.

Hsien Chang: Simple controls and basic move lists are all big pluses to get casual players into the game. More experienced players can also appreciate features like the focus attack system to keep the game interesting. It's a game for everybody and is a very well made game. John Choi: I think SF4 looks great. Too bad it didn't get US arcade release. I'm waiting for the console version to play.

Mike Watts: My initial impressions were that the game was slow and very limited. I was impressed a bit by the graphics but just thought that all the focus on super animation took away from the game play. I found the Guile ultra combo to be a bit disturbing the first time I saw it. Overall I can't really judge this game, though, because I have played maybe a total of 20 games on it without any attempt to truly get into it.

What do you think was the single greatest reason that arcades closed shop?

Seth Killian: Most people blame consoles, but I think bad management had at least as much to do with it. Arcades were notorious for being run-down, full of broken equipment, and usually operated by someone that openly disliked their customers. Kind of hard to imagine any business staying open operating like that, but arcades lasted because of the great games and the

"I miss being able to hustle people for money at Street Fighter. Damned Internet!"



amazing feeling of camaraderie and competition that came from spending time there. It was raw excitement that you mostly now only find at tournaments like EVO. There ARE still healthy arcades around, and they succeed by avoiding all of those pitfalls and taking care of their customers.

Hsien Chang: Console gaming systems.

John Choi: Gaming consoles got very powerful, on par with most arcade games. Why spend tons of money playing in arcades when you can make play in the comfort of your own home at a fraction of the cost? Also, the online gaming experience has improved greatly, and it is now viable to play Street Fighter with players from all over the world at home.

Mike Watts: Arcades closed shop due to the fact that consoles became very powerful in the manner of supporting arcade based games. Everyone that can afford to go the arcade can afford to buy a system and have the game at home. What seemed to be a good idea of inviting friends over to a gathering and playing for "free" has now snowballed into an entire issue of everyone only playing at home with the same boring competition over and over leading to the closing of arcades. Sad day

What do you miss most about the late 90's—gaming or otherwise?

Seth Killian: I miss being able to hustle people for money at Street Fighter. Damned Internet!

Hsien Chang: Good gaming competitions in arcades

John Choi: I miss going to arcades. It was more of a social experience where you meet and hang out with new people often. That whole experience died down with the popularity of consoles and decline of arcades. It's always very fun when you meet a group of people that share the same interest.

Mike Watts: I honestly miss the rivalries and trash talk. I think one major reason the scene has slowly died out is from the fact that everyone is too friendly with each other. There is not that animosity there to drive one player to beat the living hell out of the other. Side by side play on American cabinets cannot be explained. A bond develops between the two players. Japanese have head-to-head cabinets where you never see your opponent and its more of a robotic-style game, whereas Americans play side by side, where you can feel out your opponent for more of a competitive atmosphere. Oh yeah, and you can shit talk them to death when they are right next to you. Another thing I miss about the 90s is the music too, obviously. So much trash out now. How can you compare Soulja Boy to Dr. Dre? You can't.





Killzone

Kill the Helghast!

words Brady Flechter

It's only February and already we have a likely contender for game of the year. Plenty of PlayStation 3 owners, eager for a real-deal exclusive, will look upon the gritty face of Killzone 2 and cry tears of first-person joy, jumping onto the Interwebs to proclaim that everything they hoped for from the moment that fabricated E3 target video entered their world has come true.

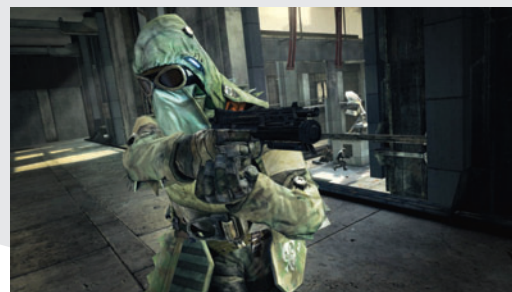
In a few important aspects, the game really is *that* good; it deserves praise as a technical powerhouse, the sound design is fantastic, the action is superbly crafted and even feels original at its best. Science fiction is always a huge plus from this gamer's chair, and the talent behind Killzone 2's visions do a fine job showing us exciting ships floating through space, giant churning machinery doing cool futuristic things, the occasional walking tank-beast

pounding away with its colossal death sticks. The Helghast army, glowing red eyes, evil to their core, are a neat inspiration for this bold world.

Yes, I have to step back and appreciate all that Killzone 2 does well, but you will not see me at the bar going on about how I love Sony's answer to Halo and Gears of War, because here is a game that kept me at a distance, maintaining a fun pitch without the resonance of a more accomplished game. I'm open to a debate on this one, how I'm wrong to get so tripped up by the empty story and pointless cut-scenes, how I'm missing the point by questioning the art-direction choices—it looks like motor oil got smeared over all the nooks and crannies—or need to be less critical toward the banal military trappings. And I've had enough of the squads these games introduce, screaming profanities without conviction, getting in the way and halting smart gameplay progress, saying idiotic

things for no reason other than a sloppy writer stuck to the lame video-game script of military types who say idiotic things in the heat of battle. We accept this line of scripting because it's what we're quickly becoming used to. F**k that.

But hey, let's move on, because most of you do and will, and the meat of Killzone 2 is not its stilted storytelling and peripheral misdeeds. This game plays great, each kill a satisfying, drag-out fight with some steely AI that is as smart as they are engaging to watch animate. The immense detail in the environments sets up an exceptional amount of kill spots and intricate lines of sight that can make the game an unusual challenge. Because there is no default radar and troops tend to be placed in areas you aren't expecting from a first-person shooter, you have to rethink certain strategies you may be accustomed to, and it really does matter what gun you have to work with.

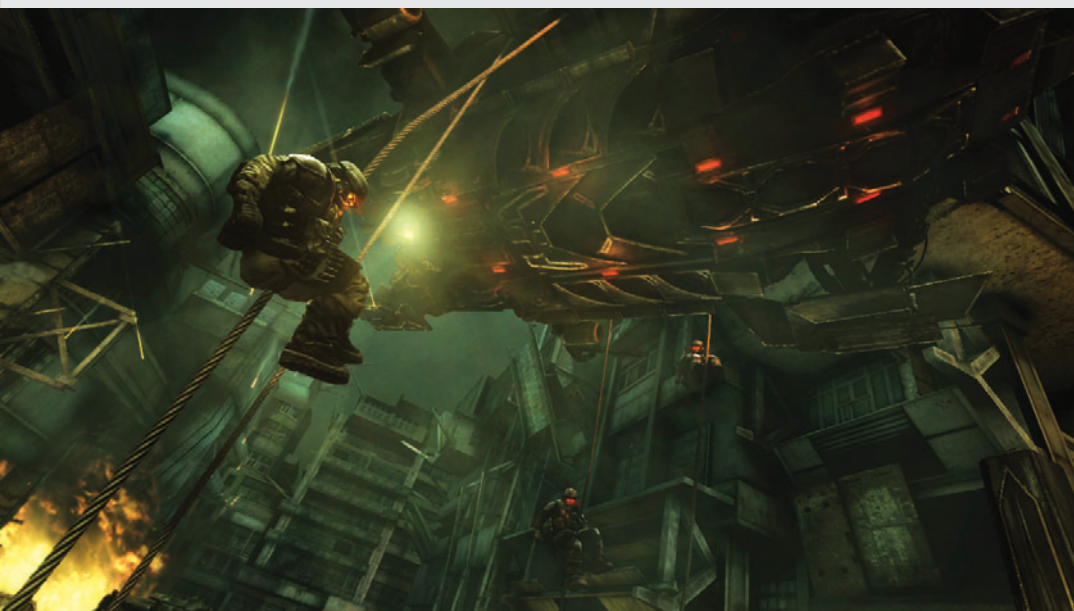


"The Helghast army, glowing red eyes, evil to their core, are a neat inspiration for this bold world."

Using those guns takes more skill than a typical FPS, with attention to speed of fire, reloads, and burst patterns coming into play in nifty ways; the beefy size of the enemy and dialed up hit points can be both frustrating and deliciously satisfying when you come to grips with the more steady, weighty tuning of the character movement.

Battles often feel like you're stuck in a deadly trench, one fresh enemy wave after another pinning your ass down. The adrenaline can go from tedious to thrilling, and when the scene falls silent—a little more silence would have done the game good—you feel a strong accomplishment before getting into the next death trap. One of the game's stronger suits is the tighter close-quarter combat, which often ends in some dramatic fashion: there's some major destruction going on in Killzone 2, its level of detail is striking.

The game deserves big credit for ramping things up and becoming a more engaging shooter the further you go. My experience lately is that most games lose their juice toward the end and struggle to introduce a proper pitch of reworked foundational ideas, but Killzone 2 really hits its stride midway and continues to surprise. The clueless hoo-rah machismo and tad-bit-generic This Is War texturing is more of a turn-off here than I'm used to feeling, but the distant-planet atmosphere turns the whole thing right around when it needs that extra crackle. Expectations are sometimes unfair in this industry; if Killzone 2 doesn't actually land on those year end lists, no matter: this is yet another in the line of strong first-person shooters waiting to make PS3 owners quite happy.



parting shot



A little more contrast wouldn't hurt, but Killzone 2 looks about as good as games get these days, and it has intense, solid gameplay to match. Excellent weapon choices, beefy single-player campaign... and more next month on the online component.



If you've seen Onechanbara, you haven't seen them all

words Dave Halverson

At first glance, and every glimpse thereafter Onechanbara Bikini Samurai Squad and Onechanbara: Bikini Zombie Slayers appear to be outmoded hack 'n' slash well-past their sell-by date with retail aspirations riding on three things Americans love: hot young girls, zombies, and extreme gore. The last thing I expected was a pair of tactical action games steeped in technique and packed with every feature under the sun, but either way, if sex really does sell, D3 is about to hit pay dirt.

I presumed both games would be aimed squarely at the theoretical "casual" gamer market. I mean what could be more mainstream in the land of the free and the home of more porn per capita than anywhere on Earth than mindless blood-soaked girl-on-zombie action? Especially given Onechanbara's origin as a Simple 2000 (a.k.a. bargain priced) series from Tamssoft, a name I hadn't heard since 1994 when they put console-based 3D fighting games on the map with Battle Arena Toshinden. On that note if you ever want to see how dramatic a leap two console generations is, comparing Toshinden's Ellis and Sofia to Aya and Saki is a real eye opener. Fortunately for D3, Tamssoft's bid to do for under-dressed katana wielding girls what they did for polygonally challenged fighters is off to a good start. Both Onechanbara Bikini Samurai Squad (360) and Bikini Zombie Slayers (Wii) heap more variation on the simple zombie slaying theme than any two similar

Onechanbara: Bikini Samurai Squad (Xbox 360)

Onechanbara: Bikini Zombie Slayers (Wii)

games combined; cross my heart and hope to ever pull off a Chaotic Luster Maelstrom. Beginning with a revealing opening movie in which Saki summons Aya from the shower as zombies lumber on the evening news, Bikini Samurai Squad is a very different animal than Bikini Zombie Slayers, outside of the core theme of chopping up zombies and other strange creatures whose origins defy the laws of plausibility while wearing as little clothing as possible.

Cursed by the Baneful Blood that runs through their veins, as Aya and Saki hack away at the undead the blood splashing on their skin strengthens their bodies as it saps their minds until the Splatter Gauge fills, sending them into a Rampage that gives them double speed and strength but also makes them twice as vulnerable to attacks as their life slowly drains away. The only way out of Rampage Mode is by using a Goddess Statue Fragment, visiting a Goddess Statue if one happens to be nearby, completing the level, or dying, which begs the question: why wear a bikini? These girls should be dressed in rain coats! There are Meters to consider as well: The more undead you kill, the more tainted with blood your blade's Gore Meter becomes, ultimately getting stuck in a zombie if it tops

out, requiring rapid button-mashing to pull out. A quick flick of the LT button cleans the blade, but in certain cases a bloody sword can come in handy. The more blood, the slower the sword—making combos like that Chaotic Luster Maelstrom almost doable. As you land blows, you also fill the Ecstasy Meter, which allows Aya and Saki one Ecstasy attack per partition (of three)—though inactivity causes it to drop, so keep moving. As long as you're dodging, the gauge stays full. Aya and Saki can also dish out kicks, perform a number of variations on basic sword maneuvers per stance (depending on the character; Saki has a wicked air throw for instance), lock-on and dodge, jump kick, throw knives or unleash one of Tamssoft's countless special moves or combos, which brings us back to that Chaotic Luster Maelstrom I'm so fond of...

All you have to do is vary the timing on the standard three-hit combo, then pause for about a half a second and press X again at which point the character's animation will change, allowing you to chain together an additional 19-25 consecutive attacks. Given that the average zombie explodes into two halves at two hits, leaving only its wandering legs to deal with, this proves effective in crowds

"If you're like me you'll find what works and to heck with unlocking the Level 3 Crimson Makeup in Dress-Up Mode."



or extreme situations—only if you can pull it off, considering that the timing for each consecutive attack becomes increasingly difficult as the blood gathers on your sword, varying the timing. Piece of cake! The Sparkling Bracelet skill (which makes it difficult for blood to stick to your sword) might help. All you have to do to obtain it is beat The Blood Mist Zombie in Chapter 10, area 8 by hitting it with a 12-hit double-sword style "Cool Combination," which as far as I can tell is near impossible. Besides, you'd still need the Bullet Bracelet, Challenging Bracelet, Red Orb Bracelet, Shield Bracelet, Ecstasy-In-Pain Bracelet, Heightened Ecstasy Bracelet, Violent Rampage Bracelet, Rampage Bracelet, and Double Rampage Bracelet to complete the set. Best keep it simple and stick to your basic Counter Stance, Jump Kick, Spin Kick, Side Kick, Foot Sweep, Thrust, Upward Slash, Counter, and Taunt attacks; along with standard combos and simpler dual button maneuvers. To say the very least, Onechanbara: Bikini Samurai Squad is an extremely hard game to master. If you're like me

you'll find what works and to heck with unlocking the Level 3 Crimson Makeup in Dress-Up Mode, but if you like unlocking extras this is your Holy Grail. In Quest Mode each three-level mission unlocks Dress-Up Mode options, Wallpapers and Achievements with requirements for each of the 27 (times 3) ranging to such a degree I don't dare elaborate, and beyond Quest Mode further Unlocks await. And should you achieve them all and beat all four difficulty settings (Normal, Hard, Violent, and Berserk) in Story Mode you gain the ability to, wait for it... reset their stats by emptying out each characters status bars into the Point Get! pool. You should win a car. Each level in Onechanbara is divided into quadrants that take long enough to load (on 360) that Tamssoft included a playable load screen, in which you can freely kill or run by the undead between caged battles that force you to kill every last zombie or die trying, including some ringers, to either progress or earn a key to unlock an adjacent area along each chapter's path. Zombies are only half the problem; this particular outbreak of the undead includes a variety of creatures such as Mudmen that require a special skill to lay to rest and usually contain a helpful item. Samurai Squad's environments are comprised of variations on a fair share of themes including Hospital, Church, Graveyard, Park, City, Sewer, Subway, Wharf, Underground Parking, Airship, Submerged Bridge, Remote Island, and Research Facility. Samurai Squad also has its own motorcycle level in which Aya careens down a straight path hacking away and popping wheelies that would have been cool if it didn't have strange controls and feel thoroughly untuned. There's no forgiving the ability to do 1 mph with her feet on the pegs, and it's all of a minute in duration. Hitches aside, it's a huge game overall, spilling over with content. There are items to collect, many of which require some level of mastery to obtain, along with apparel you can don in-game; experience points to allocate between Vitality, Skill, Power, and Reach; enough tactics to keep even the most fervent action gamer busy

for days or weeks, yet it remains somewhat pick up and play friendly, with an emphasis on "somewhat." You can play a co-op game in Free-Play or Survival, hit Practice Mode to test your skills, or venture online where playable versions of Reiko, Misery, and the game's villain Himiko and other such downloadable nuggets wait. If you like Onechanbara's style of gameplay and can live with its limited technology (normal mapping, dynamic collision, and other such next-gen creature comforts are sadly non-existent), it's \$39.99 well spent. In Tamssoft's defense, for being based on a Simple 2000 game, the character models are exceptional; nicely detailed and animated with smoky motion blurs, nary a seam, and more bounce per ounce than I've ever witnessed, and content-wise for a game that could get by on skin alone there's a lot on offer. Shame that the 360 Reiko pales compared to the Wii's...In fact the Wii game is the more polished of the two and the easiest to come to grips with. Where Bikini Samurai Squad is a grueling 20 chapter shot, Bikini Zombie Slayers (the sequel to Bikini Samurai Squad



and the 4th game in the series) is comprised of four eight-chapter (approx. 4-5 hour long) stories featuring Aya, Saki, Reiko, and Misery (!). Move, technique and special ability-wise, all of the complexity found in the 360 game makes its way to the Wii-Remote and Nunchuk with surprisingly good results. Granted it takes awhile to master the timing and all those impossible combos still seem impossible, but otherwise the ambiguous nature of Wii wagging actually makes tricky maneuvers like the Hand Thrust easy pickings by way of vigorously shaking and stabbing. Forget waving or slashing, a flick is all it takes to send limbs flying and blood spurting. Bikini Zombie Slayers also includes both a redesigned Reiko and the über nasty Misery as playable characters. The trade-off—fewer environments, more repetition (each story covers mainly variations of the same locales) and relatively short games—is substantial but ultimately I still think Bikini Zombie Slayers is a better Wii game than Bikini Samurai Squad is a 360 game. Either way, both offer exemplary depth and longevity (Slayers carries similar split-screen co-op in Free-Play and Survivor Modes, along with numerous quests and unlockables) and both are much more than meet the eye...and what meets the eye is pretty damn good. That said, I wouldn't give either a second look if it wasn't for the novelty of all these ferocious young girls getting drenched in zombie blood, especially Aya, whose sinful animation, especially on 360, is to me what added realism must be to a modern warfare junkie. I'll replay a straightforward action game—if it's good—to experience some spicy girls, locales, and monsters, the same way an FPS junkie will replay an FPS to fight in a different war. Onechanbara lacks the polish and production values of today's more advanced games but what it lacks in sheen it makes up for in sheer content and naughty bits.

parting shot

More than just a pretty face (and boobs), Onechanbara has real depth and extras to burn, along with a wide variety of zombies (and assorted other undead) that shoot to kill and keep on ticking long after their torsos are toast. The Wii game is the more refined of the two and has the edge in playable characters but the 360 is the king of content, with added variety, bosses and levels. Nuanced hacking and slashing, especially at zombies, is certainly nothing new and it may be too complex for its own good, but I guarantee you've never seen anything quite like it.

Interview

An all too brief interview with Onechanbara Producer Yoshiro Ono...

Aside from the controllers, how do Bikini Samurai Squad and Bikini Zombie Slayers differ from the original Simple 2000 series games for PlayStation2?

The sequels to the PS2 Simple 2000 series, Onechanbara and Onechanbara 2, are Onechanbara Bikini Samurai Squad (Xbox360) and Onechanbara Bikini Zombie Slayers (Wii). To put it in chronological order, it would be the two titles on PS2, then the 360 version, and then the Wii version. The PS2 Simple 2000 series Onechanbara depicts the confrontation between the main character Aya and her sister Saki. The following Onechanbara 2 tells a story about the sisters after their differences are resolved. The continuation of the third Onechanbara is then Onechanbara Bikini Samurai Squad. The game is made so that even if you have not played the previous versions, you can still have fun. Finally, in Onechanbara Bikini Zombie Slayers, in addition to the sisters Aya and Saki, you will see the return of Reiko, the clone character first introduced in Onechanbara 2, as well as the character Misery who first appeared in the 360 game. The Wii version is constructed to bring to the surface a side-story about the existence of these other characters.

What are the games origins? Is it based on any specific work or was it created entirely in-house?

Of course it's an all-original story. It was created entirely in-house by a crazy game creator who one day just came up with this idea.



"...we have beauties in bikinis, using katana blades to slash up zombies. Not to mention, they are soaked in blood."

The Onechanbara film recently hit theatres in Japan and is on its way to American TV. How did a Simple Series video game gain so much popularity?

I think this is due to the concise and easy-to-understand concept behind the game, backed up by an interesting overall theme. Don't you think? Here we have beauties in bikinis, using katana blades to slash up zombies. Not to mention, they are soaked in blood. This game is so sensational because it is so easy to understand, there is nothing out there quite like it. However, the universal agreement is; those who like it *really* like it and those who dislike it *really* dislike this game!

Ah, the joys of an outside-pressure free development environment. Since the premise (Zombie annihilation) and gameplay (acrobatic sword and gun play) are on the traditional side, is it safe to say that the game's main draw is the sex-appeal? Not that there aren't original elements involved such as Baneful Blood and plenty of tactics, but is that pretty much the idea?

Initial impact is most likely the draw from the sexy Samurai beauties—for sure it's the sex appeal. It drives excitement and shock as the girls are covered in blood as they tear the limbs off the zombies. Well, at first it starts like that. Then as the player gets into the game they realize...what a distinguished action game Onechanbara really is. In action games, is it really good enough if you just defeat enemies? No, it isn't. It is not just about defeating them—rather the fun factor behind how COOL the movements are as you defeat them. In order to chop the enemies with hype and style in this game, players themselves need to progress. In Onechanbara, we have packed countless attack combos that will allow the player to advance and acquire the skill sets to make it happen.

Aya's animation is more M-rated on 360 than Wii, although both games are rated M. Is this due to hardware limitations or the Wii's image?

In Japan the Onechanbara 360 rating was a "Z," which means you have to be 18 and older to get this game. So, in order to make it as sexy as we could, we had her shake a whole lot more! However, the Wii has a rating of "D," and is for 17 and older. That is why we emphasized the coolness more than the sexiness.

Most American games feature constant on-screen prodding, yet Japanese-developed games for the most part remain on-screen hint free. Samurai Squad has none, and Slayers has nicely done control tips that don't interfere with the gameplay. Is this because you're confident that your audience knows enough to either figure it out or read the manual?

Yes, in this case. The controls of this game are quite simple, so it is intuitive to pick up and play. We decided that it was easy enough to figure out or grasp.

Since the 360 game isn't a Simple Series game, we were hoping to see some added effects like normal mapping and practical blood splattering. Is the game a port or was it simply a matter of time or budget constraints?

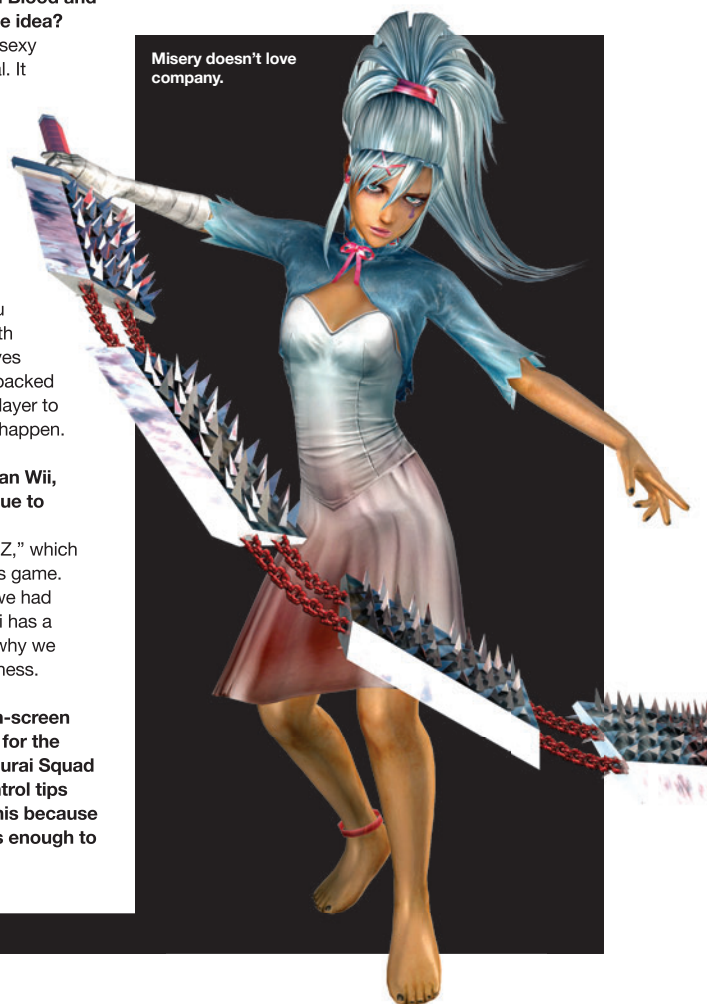
We feel that we have supported the effects necessary for this game. We concentrated on prioritizing the large amount of enemies that you can take out with some exciting moves. But yes, there are some parts where we had to settle.

Is the series slated for more action or is this it for Aya and Saki?

The possibility of continuation lies in all of the hardware, X360, PS3, and Wii although we have no specifics to report at this time. The one that is easiest to develop would be the Xbox 360. However, one thing I can definitely say is the next version—if there will be one—will have the grotesque images of Onechanbara Bikini Samurai Squad mixed with the colorful action of Onechanbara Bikini Zombie Slayers. This combo will be the top notch of the Onechanbara series. Grotesque action, hordes of very strong enemies, and of course sexy Samurai babes with the hottest outfits ever!

What about an anime? Seems like a no-brainer. There's plenty to build on story-wise...

A Onechanbara anime... That's a good idea. If it could turn into a movie, the anime version does not sound too far off. Currently it has turned into a "Manga" or comic, so turning this into an animation sounds pretty fun.



Deadly Creatures

Little Mean Planet

words Heather Anne Campbell

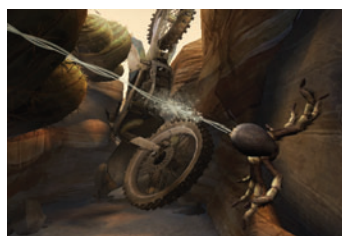
From the moment the low bass signature of Billy Bob Thornton's voice slides out of your speakers, you'll know you're not in for another Wii party game. *Deadly Creatures* may not be a mega-budget epic and there are no guns to fire or bad-guys to kill but it's got what few other Wii games seem to have: A touch of class.

It doesn't take much to class up a game, you know. Spend a little more on a voice actor (or get Billy Bob Thornton and Dennis Hopper). Think a little harder about the way the story is delivered. That's all Rainbow Studios did here, and it makes all the difference. Instead of a forgettable arachnid action game, we're playing through the bug's-eye view of a human-sized drama.

In *Deadly Creatures*, you take control of a spider or a scorpion, and crawl through underground/above-ground levels, dispatching other bugs with simple critter combos. The game is fairly linear, as are the levels themselves but this allows the developers some authorial control over the

story. Overhearing dialogue muted through layers of dirt, as your oblivious eight-legger crawls through human remains is, to my knowledge, a totally unique experience in video games. Your fingers won't know the difference, as you fend off rodent, insect, reptile and mammal crawling through the game's set pieces, but your brain will appreciate the extra mile Rainbow went in order to set this game apart from the others. If nothing else the sensation of existing in a world so close to our own yet so alien is unnerving and decidedly brutal. Being at the top of the food chain we don't have to worry about towering creatures eating us for lunch, but you begin to feel what that might be like pitted against the very real monsters that make their home in the sweltering beauty of the desert.

Playing as an armored scorpion or the more stealthy tarantula, lizards, rats, wasps, and other arachnids (that often attack in pairs or groups) pose a worthy challenge, but coming face to face with a rattle snake, gilla monsters, hawk or worse is an ominous undertaking. Fortunately (for us) it's only



Eat your heart out Bionic Commando.



a game, so survival is it at hand (well, 2 hands). The game's tactical strikes, simple combos and cinematic finishing moves are fairly intuitive via Wii-Remote and Nunchuk and the control fairly nuanced given the default margin of error that comes with wagging. The highlight of the combat, if not the game, is the feel of the characters. The animation and dexterity is uncanny and the models—in fact the tech throughout—are some of the best we've seen on Wii. Each passing chasm, wasteland or hollow evokes mood through design like dusty light peeking through cracks or the way a rotting old overturned can become an eerie fortress. Crawling along the floor, then the walls, and finally the ceiling I felt a strange sense of *Deja Vu*; the locomotion here is oddly reminiscent of the PSOne game *Ghost in the Shell* (also published by THQ). Strangely, both games sport a spidery protagonist, only

Motoko's Tachikoma tankette sports omnidirectional movement and light machine guns (bet it can't shoot silk out of its butt for a web jump though). Negotiating platforms takes on an entirely unique perspective when you're a spider along with pretty much everything else. *Deadly Creatures* isn't without flaws; it can get repetitive, the camera is prone to getting stuck in the game's cracks and crevices and there's nothing here that screams innovation but its originality far outweighs its missteps and makes it a game worth actually owning.

parting shot

A good game greatly elevated by its core concept. As always, I'd rather play an imperfect *Deadly Creatures* than a million *Gears of War* clones.

"...we're playing through the bug's-eye view of a human-sized drama."

System: PS3, Xbox 360 | Dev: Pandemic | Pub: Electronic Arts | Online: 1-16 | ESRB: T | Available: January



Lord of the Rings: Conquest

Battlefront for hairy-footed folks

Pandemic's trip to the Shire has long been touted as a Lord of the Rings take on their successful Star Wars: Battlefront series: replace stormtroopers with trolls, lightsabers with battle axes, the galaxy far, far away with Mount Doom's homeland, and you get the idea. And for the most part, Lord of the Rings: Conquest succeeds in this way, affording players the opportunity to participate in the film trilogy's most epic battles as either a scout, mage, archer, warrior, and occasionally one of Tolkien's classic characters. There's a "good" and "evil" campaign, so yes, you will finally get to kill Hobbits (and yes, it's just as satisfying as slaying Ewoks in Battlefront II), and appropriately epic audio and tons of eye candy that will no doubt have you recalling the films.

Whether you're sending arrows through the hearts of orcs or bringing down a stampeding Oliphant, Conquest is brimming with killer cinematic moments. Despite its authenticity to the license and action-packed play, though, it does falter a bit in some key areas. For one, the AI can be dumber than a hobbit on a mead bender, devolving many of the battles into button-mashing mayhem. That's not entirely bad if you're looking to indulge in some mindless hacking and slashing, but it does steal a bit of

steam from the differentiated classes when things feel pretty similar regardless of whether you're slinging arrows or wielding steel. Additionally, the solo campaign feels a bit cobbled together, leaving no doubt the development steered their focus towards the multiplayer experience. That isn't all bad either, though, as the game often shines as bright as the One Ring when you're playing local co-op with a friend or online with 15 friends. Stick with this intended multiplayer focus, and Conquest will at least hold you over till Battlefront III arrives. **Matt Cabral**

"...yes, you will finally get to kill Hobbits..."

parting shot

Not the ground-breaking LotR effort I hoped for, but one that'll definitely find me trading in my Gears of War Lancer for a broadsword for a while online.



System: PS3, Xbox 360 | Dev: Liquid Entertainment | Pub: Codemasters | Online: NA | ESRB: M | Available: January

Rise of the Argonauts

A solid action RPG with a few Achilles' heels

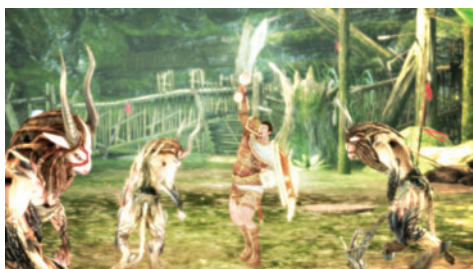
Because I've been hungering for this generation to find its defining action RPG—a genre that treated us to Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance and two amazing God of War titles, last gen—I probably enjoyed Rise of the Argonauts more than it deserved; it's buggy, occasionally ugly, and filled with patience-trying dialogue. But I'll be damned by its ancient gods if I didn't admit to having a great time battling and leveling through its rich Greek mythology tale.

The fast-paced, blood-soaked combat is so gripping, you should be able to overlook the often brain-dead AI (including your own in-the-way party members). Crashing maces through the skulls of inhuman beasts, driving spears through enemy soldiers' chests—and watching their armor shatter like porcelain dolls—and stacking limbs and torsos like cordwood is endlessly satisfying. Even better is the addictive and intuitive leveling system that sees you acquiring ability upgrades and magic powers by gaining favor with specific gods. This light role-playing element is simple, but rivals the



deeper mechanics of dedicated RPGs in its ability to totally keep you invested in your character's growth.

My eagerness and impatience to get my hands on Kratos' PS3 debut no doubt colored my enthusiasm for this game (a White Castle will look like a Ruth Chris when you're starving) but regardless, this one kept me surprisingly engaged from start to finish, despite its last-gen trappings and fun-halting VO. **Matt Cabral**



parting shot

Tolerate the bugs and droning voice work, and you just might find the combat and RPG system keeps you battling till God of War III tears up your PS3.





"House of the Dead: Overkill was an honest surprise to me..."

System: Wii | Dev: Headstrong Games | Pub: Sega | Online: 1-2 Players | ESRB: M | Avail: February 2009

House of the Dead: Overkill

Sex, violence, and zom... I mean mutants.

House of the Dead: Overkill is, for me, Sega's most daring project since Jet Set Radio back in the days of the Dreamcast. Seriously. I mean, I've owned and enjoyed past games in the House of the Dead franchise, but none of them had that feeling of being something genuinely special that Overkill does. This is a game that unashamedly flaunts its new grindhouse-inspired attitude of bloody, sexy, over-the-top violence, and does so in a way that you'll wonder how the series ever existed in any form other than this.

What really makes Overkill work isn't just the thematic upgrade, though—this is a game that plays better than previous chapters as well. Due in part to the freedom to go nuts with ridiculous situations, each of Overkill's stages feels unique from one another, and provide enough variety in what you see and do to keep things from feeling too repetitive. (Bonus points also go to the options to up the zombie count or play a longer "Director's Cut" version of stages.)

Simply put, House of the Dead: Overkill was an honest surprise to me, and has gotten me to care about a genre of gaming that I haven't even given a second thought to for a long time now. Just, whatever you do, do yourself (and the game) a favor by picking up a proper gun shell for your Wii Remote before bringing swift justice down on the undead. **Eric L. Patterson**



parting shot

Holy ****ing crap this is a ****ing good game, mother ****er. ****!



System: Xbox 360 | Dev: SimBin | Pub: Atari | Online: Multiplayer and System Link | ESRB: E | Avail: February 13, 2009

Race Pro

Hardcore

There are plenty of Xbox 360 and PS3 racers out there, but name one that's a true simulation. Gran Turismo? I sure thought so, until I got into Race Pro and discovered just how complex setting up a race car really is. Whether you choose to sign a contract and embark on a career, play with or against other players over Xbox Live or via System Link, compete in an individual championship or take in some co-op, time attack, or open practice, there's no getting around the realism that you feel the moment you get behind the wheel, followed by a quick pause; quit (do you really want to quit the game? yes) and it's time to tinker. The basic "options" menu in Race Pro, where you normally adjust the volume and maybe set the number of laps, includes steering sensitivity, where you adjust the analog sectors to determine how much your steering movements are amplified when slight pressure is applied to the left stick; throttle and brake sensitivity; steering throttle and brake dead zone; speed sensitive steering; and a global steering lock, whatever that is. I read the description and I still don't get it. Adjust the steering to around 70% and you should be able to stay on the track. Once you graduate from your three-race Class-A (Mini Cooper) contract say hello to your Caterham CSR 200, the world's most squirrely automobile. Time to visit the actual Car Set-Up screen where you can adjust things like brake bias, suspension dampers and spring rates, aerodynamics down to the air intake for your brake ducts, and other such



measurements you never knew existed. I haven't seen that many decimals and measurements since high school math. I play a lot of racing games and I've never felt so intimidated or been quite so driven to dial in a game. Winning feels so much better when you've actually set-up the car, but be warned this is not a pick up and play racing game; you have to get your virtual hands dirty. Race Pro is the closest thing to real racing there is on console, and while it may not

make me park my Mudpluggers just yet, it's definitely all the official FIA championship racing you could possibly ask for. Start your engines. **Dave Halverson**

parting shot

Simulation and racing aficionados raise a glass; everyone else, just try to stay on the road.

review

System: PSP Developer: Nippon Ichi Publisher: NIS America ESRB: T Available: February 17

Prinny

Can I Really be the Hero?

Prinny fantastic if you ask me!

words Dave Halverson

Say what you will about the state of the video game industry—I know I do—but one thing it's always been is full of surprises...and this is a BIG surprise.

Anyone who's played Disgaea or has watched Disgaea: Hour of Darkness will tell you: Prinnyes rule. It's just a fact. Prinnyes are small penguin-like vessels with tiny bat wings and peg legs that contain the souls of humans who have lead worthless lives, such as thieves or murderers, as they suffer the consequences in the afterlife, sentenced to a life of servitude in the Netherworld where they work as domestic slaves until they either do enough good deeds to be reincarnated, or explode...The major drawback to being a Prinny (aside from a life of servitude) is that when tossed or handled recklessly they explode. Yeah dood, it's not good. (Prinnyes call everyone "dood," by the way.) So it's dangerous work, especially if you happen to be in the service of Etna, Vassal to the Overlord and leader of the Prinny squad, which these particular Prinnyes of course are. Etna's extremely hot tempered, devious, underhanded, self-centered, evil, and at the moment very angry and a little hungry. One of the Prinnyes has eaten her dessert and won't come clean, so as a penalty our "Hero" has been ordered to bring her the "Ultra Dessert" by daybreak or the entire squad gets the axe...literally.



He tries the explosion excuse but Etna takes the spell off of him so off he goes in search of the ingredients for the confection of Etna's desire, which must be pretty special since everyone who's tried to attain it has ended up dead.

Here's where it gets interesting. As you can see, Prinny is a gorgeous 2D game employing 3D backgrounds and 2D sprites in the vein of Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins, right down to the multi-directional double-jump. Your Prinny can slash, air slash, double jump, hang, hip-pound and pick up and throw bombs. You begin the game with 1000 lives—yup, 1000—on either Standard or Demon difficulty.



In Demon mode you die in one hit but in Standard you can take 3 so it's really like having 3000 lives...Setting out from the Prinny HQ outside of Etna's Chambers, where you can mull over Tutorials, save, or talk to your fellow Prinnyes (and if you dare, Etna), you must forage through six different-themed stages collecting ingredients for the Ultra dessert—which are of course held by the head demon of each area. Along the way, Hip Pounding often will reveal Lucky Dolls hidden in each stage, along with orbs which you can use to revive nameless souls (those things hanging around Etna's front porch) and receive new features. Since the Netherworld is calm by



Hand over the ingredient dood!



"The gameplay in Prinny is the stuff of side-scrolling dreams."



day and outright demonic by night, the passage of time greatly affects each area depending on the time of day or night you visit. Returning to a level you completed by day (easy) you might find bridges or ladders that weren't there before in the evening (hard) or night (deadly hard). Each stage has six variations in total, which means you'll need to play the game at least six times to play them all, after which a little demon told me four more (at least) will appear. What did we do to deserve such a feast of 2D glory? I don't know, but after the PSP drought we've been having this is like a torrential downpour.

The gameplay in Prinny is the stuff of side-scrolling dreams. The control is precise and the animation sheer delight on both the Prinnyes and their enemies—great bosses too as you can imagine—and jumping into an Air Slash bumps the action into a cool 3D perspective, a move that never gets old. The action takes to the sky too (and it's Prinny great, believe me), the replay value is simply ridiculous, and in case of emergency you can change difficulty at any time. The soundtrack is simply perfection, in the vein of Nippon Ichi's other patented Disgaea scores, and the hilarious (as usual) storyline and writing (written in English and acted in Japanese) are simply in a class by themselves. I am fulfilled once again! Bring on the 2D dood!

parting shot

Well, what can I say? Prinny: Can I Really be the Hero? is the perfect PSP game. Eat Prinny poop if you despise my lack of negative expletives. I have nothing bad to say. Now if NIS America would just follow up with either a true 7th generation Disgaea or a sequel focused on Etna as the lead, my Netherworld will be complete!



System: DS Developer: Renegade Kid Publisher: Mastiff ESRB: T Available: January 2009

review

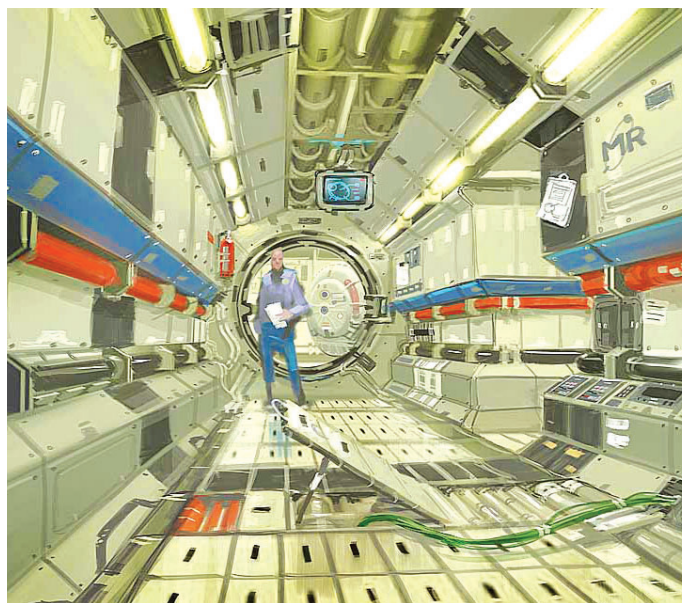
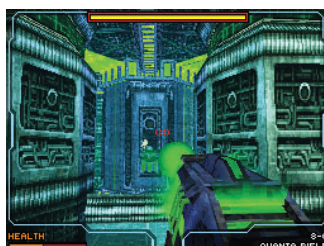
Moon

Eclipses the competition

Renegade Kid's inspired efforts continue to shine like a beacon in the sea of me-too DS titles. With 2007's *Dementium: The Ward*, they proved the underpowered portable could do a decent first-person survival horror game, and with *Moon* they once again push the limits of the four-plus year old handheld, delivering a solid sci-fi FPS. Sure, they're not the first to show these genres could be done on the DS, but they deserve credit for steering clear of the system's puzzle, strategy, and RPG comfort zones while sacrificing little quality in the process.

Moon is one of the system's best looking games—it doesn't hurt that it runs at a smooth 60 frames per second—and its FPS controls are as good as any (even *Metroid Prime: Hunter's*) mapped to the unconventional dual-display/touch-screen set-up. It spins a creepy *Dead Space*-light yarn, and provides plenty of satisfying robot-blasting action, supported by a nice variety of futuristic firepower. The extremely atmospheric presentation also hosts some fun vehicle and remote-controlled droid sequences that are paced perfectly among the exploration and shooting focus. Best of all, *Moon*'s checkpoint system doesn't repeat *Dementium*'s one major flaw of forcing you to replay long sections every time you die.

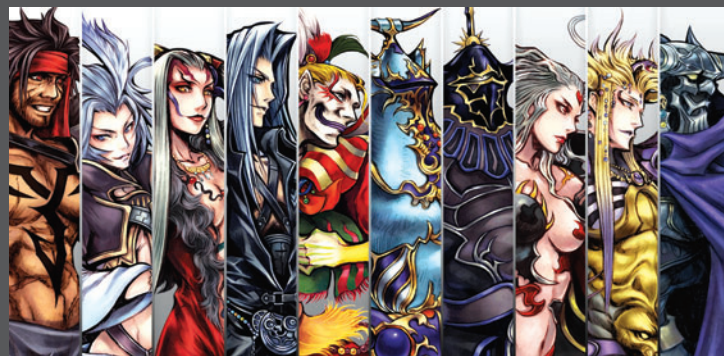
It's no secret the DS's library is brimming with great games, but it's only a select few that make me stop and think: "Wow, am I really experiencing this on a portable system?" *Moon*'s cinematic presentation, addictive play, moody music, and technical prowess do just that, happily reminding me how far my favorite pastime has come. **Matt Cabral**



"It spins a creepy *Dead Space*-light yarn, and provides plenty of satisfying robot-blasting action..."

preview

System: PSP Developer: Square Enix Publisher: Square Enix Multi: Online or local wireless ESRB: TBA Available: Summer



DISSIDIA

FINAL FANTASY

Can Square Enix hook fighter fans on RPG stat crack?

words Casey Loe



Any complaints about a lack of innovation at Square Enix should be silenced by Dissidia: Final Fantasy, a game that takes a step beyond boundless creativity to dip a toe into the waters of OCD-flavored madness.

Dissidia brings together the heroes and villains of the first ten Final Fantasies in a one-on-one fighting game that isn't quite like anything I've ever played. The 3D battlefields are huge, varied, and highly destructible, consisting of everything from a Super Mario Galaxy-esque planetoid in the void of space to a castle with an open throne room surrounded by winding hallways. Each character has two forms of attack, one that steals its opponent's "Brave" when it hits, and another that deals damage based on the amount of Brave in the attacker's pool. At first, the game isn't a whole lot of fun; characters have very limited move sets (many having only a single damage-dealing attack), there's no good way to traverse the large stages, and the game's excessive array of dodges, blocks, summon spells and other special mechanics forces players to use awkward combinations of the PSP's shoulder and face buttons.

But Dissidia is as much an RPG as it is a fighter, and a steady flow of EXP will gradually mend most of those

complaints. Leveling up a character earns you new attacks that you can set to open slots, new movement options like the essential air dash, and auto-abilities that can handle some of the game's more complicated maneuvers automatically. You also earn new equipment that strengthens your characters, new accessories that provide conditional boosts when strategically arranged, and summon spells that toy with the Brave mechanic in all sorts of interesting ways.

Even in a quick one-on-one fight, dozens of things are happening off of the battlefield. You're given random bonus conditions to satisfy, like doing 500 points of damage in your first hit, which can earn your character bonus Ability Points if he wins. Matching the right character against the right foe raises your chance of earning certain rare items that you'll need to create other, rarer items. And the Chocobo that is continuously flying through your menu screen is tempting you with bonuses like a one-time 50% EXP bump. Every victory earns you EXP to level up your character, AP to allow him to equip more skills, Gil to spend at the in-game equipment shop, and PP to spend at a meta-game shop that unlocks new characters, costumes, music tracks, and rules. Your skills are themselves leveling



up to require fewer AP, your summons are draining their battery charges, and... so on. Dissidia's RPG underpinnings run a hundred times deeper than any Soul Calibur Quest Mode, and we're still just talking about a one-on-one quick fight.

The game's even-deeper Story-Mode revolves around a war between two gods, the beautiful Cosmos and the diabolical Chaos. Each has pulled ten champions from other worlds, with Chaos choosing the universe's vilest villains and Cosmos choosing the ten biggest emo pussies this side of a My Bloody Valentine concert. Yes, even the old-school Final Fantasy heroes have joined Cloud and Squall in being more concerned with second-guessing their motivations, confronting their inner demons and ruminating on the nature of combat than they are in kicking ass. Which makes for an unbearably awful story. But despite that, the meat of Story Mode is fast-paced and fun, with each

character's chapter consisting of a series of board-game levels that they must clear to advance. You earn prizes by beating them in as few moves as possible, but aiming for speed would mean neglecting the treasures that have been scattered throughout the board. That tension provides a powerful incentive to replay each chapter multiple times.

Dissidia: Final Fantasy is a massive game, seemingly designed to occupy PSPs for months if not years. Conquering every Story Mode and raising all the characters to level 99 looks to take around 100 hours, and even then Dissidia has plenty more for players to do before it's well and truly conquered. (And of course, you can then take your super-tuned characters online to battle other players for still more rewards.) While the depth of its core mechanics have yet to be plumbed, this tiny UMD fighter has already shown us the scope of an RPG epic.



System: PSP Developer: SCEJ Publisher: SCEA Online: 1 Player ESRB: E Available: February 2009

review

LocoRoco 2

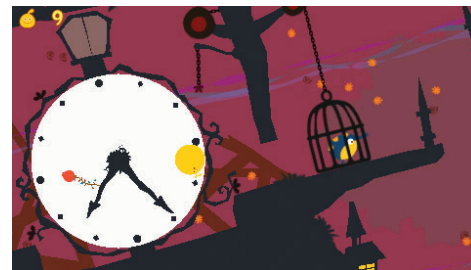
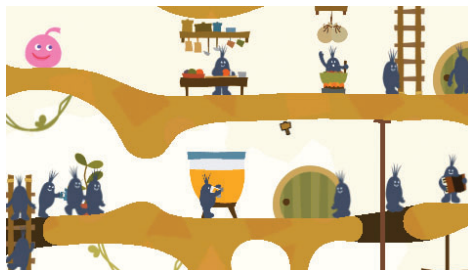
Sony builds a stronger, faster, better LocoRoco

Sometimes, what a sequel needs to do is not try to completely re-invent its predecessor, but just find a new perspective with which to present its ideas.

At its core, LocoRoco 2 is essentially the original game mixed with a few new additions here and there, from the stylish gloom of the BuiBui Fort, to increased abilities for our LocoRocos, to new mini-games or MuiMui House-building fun to serve as breaks between levels.

It's that adjustment in perspective, however, that makes LocoRoco 2 a better game than the first. Biggest is the change to the flow of stage progression, which kept the game feeling fresh where the first LocoRoco could sometimes start to wear a bit thin. When mixed with a stronger emphasis on storytelling and a more polished overall presentation, you've got a sequel that feels more enjoyable, more accessible, and much better developed. **Eric L. Patterson**

"...a sequel that feels more enjoyable, more accessible, and much better developed."



System: DS Developer: Namco Bandai Publisher: XSEED Online: 1 Player ESRB: E Available: February 2009

review

Retro Game Challenge

Retro in looks, timeless in fun

If you think of Cloud Strife or N64 Rumble Packs when I ask you about the "good old days" of gaming, then Retro Game Challenge wasn't made for you.

No, it was instead made for those of us who grew up in a time before polygons were king and when sprite flickering was the bane of our existence. While not all of them match up to the length of real-life NES titles, the eight homages to the 8-bit generation we are presented with here are far from mini-games, and succeed in both giving a nod to beloved classics while presenting ideas and challenges that feel fresh and new.

You should buy Retro Game Challenge for two reasons: because it is absolutely worth playing if you have fond memories of gaming's past, and because it will help convince XSEED to bring over the soon to be released (in Japan) sequel. The only real disappointment I had was in the brain-dead decision to make blowing into the in-game cartridges a simple menu selection rather than an interaction with the built-in DS mic. I mean, how do you not go that route? **Eric L. Patterson**



System: DS Developer: Global A Entertainment Publisher: Atlus Online: 1 Player ESRB: E Available: February 2009

review

My World, My Way

I'm sorry, but your prince is in another dungeon

My World, My Way is not especially impressive technically. It is an RPG with a very simple "select the next location" overworld, towns that are basically matte painting that you traverse by moving an icon from place to place, and foes that were ripped straight out of Global A's previous DS effort, Master of the Monster Lair.

The thing is, MWMW's clunky moments are completely forgiven in light of its outrageous charm and legitimately interesting gameplay elements. Elise's adventures to prove her worth to the heroic knight that caught her eye are filled with humorous parodies of the Japanese RPG genre, and while the basics may feel a bit dull at times, the characters and their dialogue keep things from ever getting boring. By far the best features of the game are Elise's "Pout Points," where her spoiled nature allows her (you) to change a number of elements of the game at will, and her slime companion, who increases his stats not through XP but by cloning parts from defeated enemies. **Eric L. Patterson**

There are times when "cute" does apply.



indie circuit **SPECIAL**

THE RISING STARS OF INDIE

As we pour through the new wave of independent game projects with the 2009 Independent Games Festival on the horizon (ceremony to be held at this year's GDC, March 23-27), it's clear that the indie movement is absolutely thriving. In a new era of limitless digital distribution potential and vast interconnected communities, talented smaller teams are free to pursue innovative game design without the specter of corporate decision makers colluding and compromising their oft-times unorthodox vision. Over the following pages we've assembled some of the brightest minds and projects in independent development today, including IGF finalists past and present. Check out these games, talk to your friends about them, and lend your support.

INTRODUCING Infinite Ammo



Alec Holowka
Lead everything. Programmer, gameplay designer, gifted musician.



Chris Lobay
Designer, musician, PR and marketing go-to man



Katie de Sousa
Lead Artist; has illustrated for Devil's Due, Marvel and Volta.



Ian Holowka
Senior programmer, level designer, part-time musician.

"We don't have that pressure: marketing boards telling us what to do, thirty people sitting around saying, 'Should we make the stars yellow or blue?'"

Chris Lobay, *Infinite Ammo*

Interview

Infinite Ammo

Headquarters: Winnipeg, Manitoba

ALEC HOLOWKA | IAN HOLOWKA | CHRIS LOBAY



play: Indie development sounds kind of romantic to those looking in, but how tough is it to get an indie team running smoothly?

Alec: Well, in the past, before I started my own teams, I was invited to other start-ups. I'd say: "Cool, I'll be your programmer if you guys are making this game." And you see like thirty, forty percent of the people there are talented, self-motivated, interested in the pride of just making a game... and the rest don't get it.

What's the brainstorming process like with just four people? It must be pretty intimate compared to large teams.

Alec: It's more personal.

Chris: It's been a lot of very personal ideas on each of the games we're working on. Paper Moon was a short game, kind of a prototype for a mechanic, actually inspired by the Ella Fitzgerald song "Paper Moon." That had a lot of personal ideas, especially from the art side. On Heroes and Villains, we brainstormed based on an idea that I had for a superheroes game. Our big title that everybody really gets to work on is Marian, which we'll be starting full time development on around April.

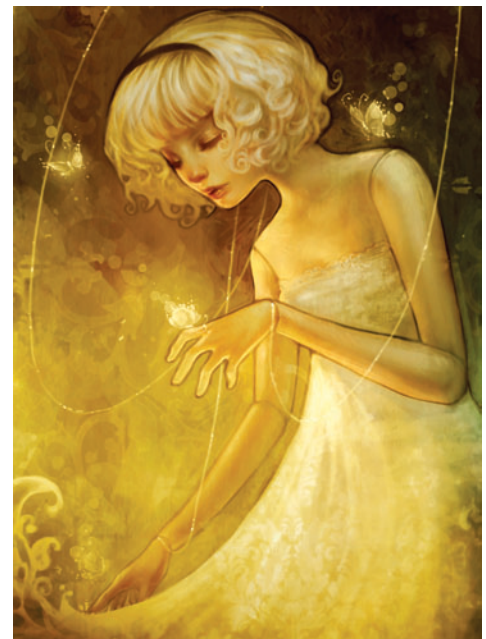
What sort of game is Marian?

Alec: It's an action adventure game with exploration elements, and the gameplay and story are very closely integrated.

Chris: It's kind of based on everyone's life experiences. We did a bunch of really intense group brainstorming sessions last August to come up with the concepts and mechanics for Marian.

Tell us about the world of Marian, and who is the Narrator—the villain?

Alec: It's the dream world, kind of between the world of the living and dead; the place that dreams go



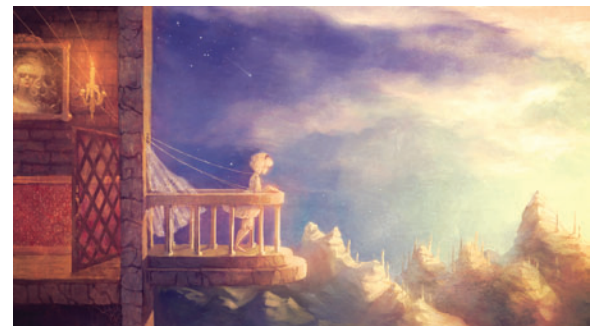
before they enter into people. There are strange dream creatures living in this world. Who are they? A large part of the game is finding and interacting with these creatures, sort of similar to Aquaria. You'll see little baby creatures as well, these small blobs that eventually grow up to become dreams. The Narrator basically manages the dream world, looks after it. Early on Marian rebels against him, but later their relationship changes.

Ian: We don't have a lot of black and white, good and evil stuff in this world—

Alec: --That's kind of the theme, right? Things aren't what they seem, bad guys aren't 100% bad. Letting you see perspectives is what we're doing. Some ambiguity to the morality.

Marian is a marionette that can use different parts attached to her strings. How does that work?

Ian: Marian's a puppet, and we want to have this theme of the game come through in the gameplay. She'll have new parts she can put on and swap, parts she can repair herself with, and she flies and stuff. It's not the central mechanic, but you'll have fun swapping parts. Chris: The parts actually have a very symbolic purpose in the story, and we're keeping the story on the down-low since it's kind of what makes Marian so great, but it's revealed later on. You'll explore parts of the dream world with different themes, like the Toy Shop. We'll have nightmares that you sort of collect too; there's one part where you'll actually feed nightmares to another creature.



Alec: At the beginning of the game you start off as Marian in the Tower; you're this puppet character attached with strings to a puppet handle, and there's this strange shadowy hand moving you around, telling you to do things—the Narrator. The player will want to rebel and do their own thing, and eventually break free and get control of their own puppet strings. You actually move your puppet handle around, as a weapon, sometimes as a tool to attach to things and climb up. The strings are really cool because they're symbolic, but also great in a physical, practical sense.

The strings seem tricky in terms of action...

Alec: We prototyped a couple of ways of doing it. One is



a kind of the traditional Castlevania way with the whip, you know: throw in this direction, throw in that direction. We're also talking about a combo system where you actually draw a path with the mouse, then you follow the path and do combos off enemies. We're also looking into using the 2.5-D elements for exploration, letting Marian move into background layers. Chris: Our big focus is to express the theme of the game through gameplay, kind of having the player's emotions reflect what's going on in the gameplay. Alec: Right, rather than just say you're supposed to care, we'll build situations that encourage players to feel that way.

You're planning to release Marian in episodic fashion, as a three part complete story. How are you going to keep players busy between episodes, or is Marian inherently very replayable?

Chris: Well, I've been using this analogy... It's kind of like how Oblivion is really replayable because there's so much stuff to do. It's not replaying levels and collecting items a certain way, there's just so much content within that space to go through and find stuff. For Marian, we have a bunch of different levels, but each one isn't linear. You can go back in and discover new areas, and there's a huge amount of content in that way. Alec: We're also going to build a strong online community. We want people to talk about the story between releases, about the stuff they found and did in the world.

Who do you play in Heroes and Villains, hero or villain?

Alec: You get to choose. You have a team of people with superpowers, they're thrown into this urban disaster situation, and there are innocent civilians trying to flee the scene. You can decide to either help them or hinder them.

Ian: They're almost like Lemmings, Incredible Machine-style, where stuff happens to them and you can influence it with your hero. Obviously you can choose to save as many citizens as possible, but alternately you can kill as many citizens as possible, be a total jerk. At



the end of the level, whatever you allowed to happen, you'll be given Hero and Villain scores. We allow you to do both, but getting the max score in either will be pretty difficult.

Does the game world start to perceive you as hero or villain?

Ian: We have a bunch of little things, like a newspaper that comes up ever couple of levels with a report on how you're doing. It might be cool if citizens started to treat you a different way, like run away from you if you've been really bad. That's stuff we're trying out.

Alec: We're more focused on the characters right now. Each one has two main powers. We have this big muscle guy that can bash things around, this girl called Heartbreak who's invincible, but her only weakness is her emotions, 'cause she's an emo. We have a guy that can stretch to create a bridge out of his body, so people walk over it. Another that can carry a lot of people to safety.

Ian: A guy with laser eyes could use it to fight criminals or help them break down walls, a guy that can throw

"We have this big muscle guy that can bash things around, this girl called Heartbreak who's invincible, but her only weakness is her emotions..."

Alec Holowka, Infinite Ammo

stuff could clear rubble away, or just toss citizens for fun. We give players the tools to do what they want.

Alec: We're going to have a great achievements system for Heroes and Villains, it's perfect for it. Stuff like a 'Throw 50 old guys off the top of a building' achievement.

Chris: [Laughs]. We want to expand on this license too. But Heroes and Villains is really on a much smaller scale than Marian. It's going to be ready sooner—we'll actually have a playable version at GDC this year.

Looks like a side-scrolling 2D game with 3D visual elements, like your other titles...

Alec: Yeah, again we're doing a 2.5-D thing. We'll have buildings made from 3D meshes, and we've done some really great tests with normal maps: we have 2D characters with normal maps on them, some nice lighting in there—it's a very cool look.

Chris: I think Katie (Katie de Sousa, IA's lead artist) has been inspired recently by the classic Disney cartoons. Palettes that are sort of pastel in a way, these amazing watercolor painted backgrounds, figures that are more subtly shaded.

Have any publishers come to you with work for retro remakes, recognizing that you specialize in 2D / 2.5-D gameplay?

Alec: We haven't really gotten our name out there yet; Bit-Blot is still the big name because of Aquaria. I've received some cool encouraging emails from people that are pretty big in the industry.

Chris: We have to be careful about our choices. Any game for a larger publisher with the mainstream market in mind, it's way less of a personal vision and more of a design by committee sort of thing. We don't have that pressure, you know: marketing boards telling us what to do, thirty people sitting around saying, "Should we make the stars yellow or blue?"

Alec: The development process is a lot more dynamic too. You can be in the middle of a project and just decide: this isn't working, and toss it out and start again. I've done that before, and it works out for the better. When you're doing something for a big company, all those checks and balances... you get stuck in projects that aren't going down the right path.

I bet all that freedom requires some personal sacrifice...

Chris: Yeah, the future's looking great; it's like something new and exciting pops up every week, sometimes every day. But we're still sacrificing a whole lot right now, whether it's time or money—or both.

But you never sacrifice your vision for the games, right?

Alec: Definitely not. I mean, what would be the point?

That's what we like to hear. Best of luck in the future guys.

Aquaria

Alec Holowka is best known for his work at Bit-Blot, where he and partner in crime Derek Yu created the 2007 IGF Grand Prize winning Aquaria. Built in Alec's homemade Open GL-based engine and soaked in Derek's beautiful 2D artwork, Aquaria is the underwater fantasy adventure of Naija, a young ocean sprite who sings and weaves spells from the crystalline blue to the deep abyss. Aquaria can be acquired on Steam (with achievements) for under \$20.



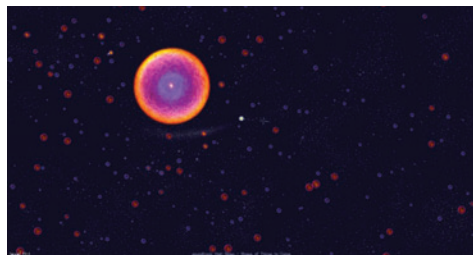
indie circuit SPECIAL

THE RISING STARS OF INDIE

Osmos

DEVELOPER: HEMISPHERE GAMES

In Hemisphere Games' Osmos you control an energy globe in an astral field of other globes. You grow your globe by absorbing other globes, and you can only absorb others if your globe is larger. As you propel the globe towards targets, it loses mass, causing it to shrink, and your jet stream leaves behind a small trail of matter which can be absorbed by other globes, growing them. Some levels have enemy globes with special properties that make them tougher to absorb. This ingenious concept is elegantly executed and guided by superb ambient music selections.



IGF 2009 finalist: Excellence in Design, Technical Excellence, Grand Prize nominee

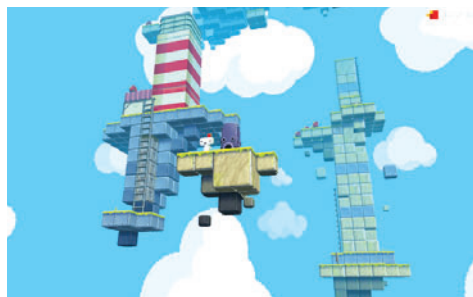
Fez

DEVELOPER: POLYTRON

The Polytron Corporation has taken control of Fez! No need to fear, as Phil Fish of the celebrated Kokoromi Collective remains at the helm. Polytron is a new company front to drive the development and production of Fez. After winning the Excellence in Visual Art award at the 2008 Independent Games Festival (plus a nomination in Design Innovation) and the subsequent flurry of Fez coverage, Phil and crew decided to get serious. Recent sightings demonstrate big vertical level designs for the unique Paper Mario-like 2.5 platformer, where players must rotate the world so the red-capped Fez can access objects and reach platforms in the background and foreground.

The Polytron team is committed to a 2009 release for Fez on computers and possibly one or more undisclosed console. Phil Fish is also collaborating with Infinite Ammo's Alec Holowka on a new iPhone game.

It's the inimitable Trixel-powered Fez.



IGF 2009 finalist: Excellence in Visual Art

Blueberry Garden

DEVELOPER: ERIK SVEDANG

The enchanting and enigmatic Blueberry Garden is an abstract 2D adventure by Erik Svedang featuring an ecosystem that continuously evolves and creatures that react to its changing and your presence. You'll speak to the forest, fly through the clouds, and help the natives find peace.



IGF 2009 finalist: Excellence in Audio, Grand Prize nominee

Cletus Clay

Claymation returns to games! Now in HD. Cletus Clay is the painstakingly animated work of Anthony Flack and his TunaSnax team. Cletus is a simple mountain man that goes berserk when aliens park their saucers on his land. Classic side-scrolling action gameplay ensues.

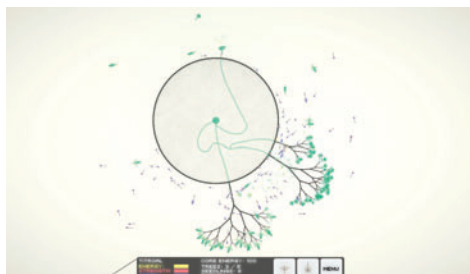


IGF 2009 finalist: Excellence in Visual Art

Dyson

DEVELOPER: RUDOLF KREMERS & ALEX MAY

Dyson is a relaxing real-time strategy game with a focus on ambience. Players conquer asteroid belts by controlling self-replicating mining machines and planting special Dyson trees on each asteroid. It's slick and intuitive, with soothing music by Milieu and an alluring visual simplicity inspired by titles like Crayon Physics and Blueberry Garden.



IGF 2009 finalist: Grand Prize nominee

The Graveyard

DEVELOPER: TALE OF TALES

The Graveyard is the thoughtful work of Tale of Tales, a tiny Belgian studio that produces wonderful game art experiments like The Endless Forest, 8, and The Path. The Graveyard is a very personal experience. You guide an old, hobbled woman through a graveyard. At first you hear the din of the outside world; police sirens, car alarms, human chaos. Winds are buffeted against shifting trees, ignored by the immobile, eternal gravestones. You feel empathy for the old woman, shuffling along deeper into the graveyard. As you enter the chapel area, the hustle and bustle of the world gives way to birds' song and tranquility. She sits on a bench and ponders. There's a soulful chorus of tragedy and lamentation, her stoic acceptance of it all. You walk out of the graveyard together.



IGF 2009 finalist: Innovation Award

Snapshot

DEVELOPER: KYLE PULVER AND PETER JONES

Snapshot will have you guiding young Pic on a copy and paste adventure through a vibrant 2D world. Progress is based on Pic's magic camera, which allows him to snap and save photos of world objects and other characters. You'll paste these images back into the world to solve ever-changing puzzles. Kyle and Peter have a lot of work ahead on Snapshot, but early gameplay looks awfully clever.



IGF 2009 finalist: Excellence in Design

Zeno Clash

DEVELOPER: ACE TEAM

There's more to ACE Team's Zeno Clash than its exotic Source-powered visuals, but that's a great place to start. Zeno Clash has a really unique steampunk fantasy style that could be described as a cross between Panzer Dragoon, Guild Wars and a Guillermo del Toro film (the inventive creatures in Pan's Labyrinth and Hellboy spring to mind). Zeno Clash is the vision of Edmundo Bordeu, ACE Team's talented art and story director. The striking visuals are complemented by a similarly exotic narrative. You play Ghat, offspring of Father-Mother, the hermaphrodite leader of the most powerful family in Halsteddom. Ghat has just been forcibly banished by his family, forced to flee into the wide world of Zenozoik and find his way.

The perspective is first-person and the action places a heavy emphasis on hand-to-hand combat, with a range of fighting moves for Ghat to learn. Zeno Clash handles the first-person melee combat surprisingly well, making good use of an enemy focus toggle, blocking, combos, grabs and finishers. The first person camera and attack animations look great, and you'll see bloody wounds accumulating on enemies. You can also wield ranged weapons made from bits of junk and organic material, like recoil bows with rusty gears, skull bombs, muskets and dual handguns made of bone and petrified fish husks.

Our brief taste of Zeno Clash proved rather promising. After fighting off Ghat's enraged brothers and sisters, we skipped town with Deadra, his female companion and confidante. Ghat received directions from shady mutants in a bar and traveled to a beautifully drawn desert landscape. Here we defeated a madman who tossed explosive parachuting rats from atop a giant dinosaur's head. More please.



IGF 2009 finalist: Excellence in Visual Art

Interview

2D Boy

KYLE GABLER AND RON CARMEL

Not every ex-EA employee ends up at another huge publisher. Some escapees, namely Kyle Gabler and Ron Carmel, co-founders of 2D Boy, take a diametrically opposed route—from big business grind to empowered indie passion. We spoke to Kyle and Ron post-World of Goo about the tribulations of development, the vindication of success, and their inspirations.



Play: Looking back on World of Goo with the rose-tinted glasses of glowing critical and fan reception, are there certain features that you're still honestly, objectively proud of, even after those long months glued to the project?

Kyle: Good question! I don't know if our glasses are rose tinted yet. They are still kind of subjectively steamy splattered and terror tinted. On the creative side, I know my biggest fear was I didn't know how people would react to the story. The cutscenes, signposts, everything changing in Chapter 4, and especially the non-standard conversation with MOM—hi MOM! I was terrified people would see these things, and disregard the whole game with WTF typed into a forum somewhere, and never play again.

And of course that never came to pass...

I'm thrilled; it turns out it's these risky story elements, even though they weren't perfect, became some of the favorite parts of the game.

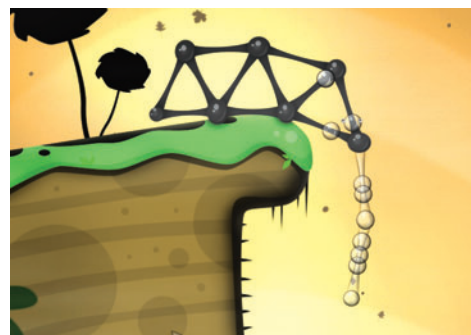
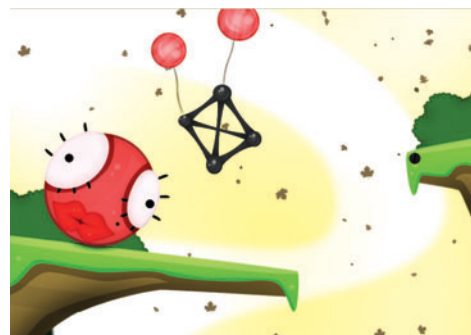
We're in the midst of a retro resurgence. Classic 2D forms are evolving and expanding traditional narrative; look at a game like Braid. Will future 2D Boy games be inspired by particular genres or forms, retro or otherwise?

Ron: Possibly the most important thing I learned from working with Kyle over the last couple of years is that execution matters more than the idea. My favorite example of this is the movie Office Space. There are few movie scripts that are as unoriginal as that of Office Space, and yet the execution is a masterpiece. Timing, acting, pacing, humor, they all work perfectly to create one of my favorite movies of all time. So yeah, retro forms are as much a possibility as something totally new, it's just a matter of where we find inspiration.

Kyle: I think we'd very much like to offer something completely new. And I hope we do. The danger though, that we've seen with World of Goo, is that there's no good way to describe the game. Descriptions of World of Goo that I've heard sound pretty boring. I mean, what in the world is a 'physics based puzzle game'? That sounds horrible! Then, when you play the game, you realize it's something else entirely. I think no matter what our next game is, we'll describe it as "Halo and Katamari with booth babes and guns."

That's probably someone's dream game! Name a couple of your favorite designers and what sort of inspiration they lend to Goo and your development philosophy.

Kyle: Inspiration for the original Tower of Goo actually came from toys, like Legos and Tinker Toys, and the fact that building stuff with them was always more fun than the final product. Game designers I look up to include Tim Schafer, who I hope doesn't Google himself and find that I mention him in every single interview, and



2D Boy's acclaimed World of Goo took home Design Innovation and Technical Excellence awards at last year's Independent Games Festival.

"I was terrified people would see these things, and disregard the whole game with WTF typed into a forum somewhere."

Kyle Gabler, 2D Boy

then realize it's all part of a subversive plot to get him to call me so we can hang out. He's the definitive example of someone who successfully injects strong themes and story arcs and character into games.

And professor and designer Jesse Schell always points out that the experience a player has is more important than anything else—everything else: graphics, technology, music, whatever, only work to serve the experience. This means that more often than not, there are shortcuts to getting a wonderful experience into a player that don't require lots of CPU cycles or a team of hundreds of animators.

Wise words. Thanks gentlemen, can't wait to play your next game.



Ask Alienware

032 | 03_09

In our March edition we broach the topic of notebook gaming and battery life, we discuss the effects of in-game VOIP on your multiplayer experience, and we compare the value of anti-aliasing, anisotropic filtering and texture resolution.

q. I was thinking about investing in one of Alienware's gaming laptops so I can game when I travel, but I'm a little concerned about their relative battery life. When a laptop is equipped with a powerful multicore processor and a strong 3D card, doesn't this really become a drag on the machine's peak battery life potential? I'll need to do both work and play on this laptop, so it must strike an even balance.

Kevin, CA.



Alienware: What you're looking for is the Alienware Area-51 m15x. For all-out gaming, it packs the most powerful mobile graphics card ever in a 15.4-inch notebook, the NVIDIA GeForce 9800M GT, plus you get the unparalleled processing power of an Intel Core 2 Extreme CPU. What makes the Area-51 m15x ideal for road warriors is an array of features designed to maximize the system's power saving capabilities. BinaryGFX allows you to switch between the notebook's NVIDIA graphics card and an onboard GPU, reducing power consumption. Stealth Mode takes this even further by throttling back multiple system components including the CPU. If you still need to squeeze out some extra time away from the AC adapter, you can slide in a hot-swappable, Smart Bay backup battery. When you're off the road and you want to get back in the game, just crank everything back to the max and you're good to go.

q. How bandwidth intensive is VOIP or in-game chat? For example, I use Steam for pretty much all my multiplayer gaming lately and I'm always surprised and impressed by the excellent voice quality—notably in Valve titles. I have a good

broadband connection, but I still get occasional hiccups. Is there anything I can tweak to smooth it out?

Christopher, NB.

Alienware: In-game chatting via VOIP can and will affect your available bandwidth because you have to leave a certain amount of bandwidth open to communicate back and forth. Obviously this takes away from what would normally be dedicated to the game itself. That's why you often have to hit a designated key or button to chat. This keeps the line from staying open all the time, freeing that bandwidth when you're not speaking. If you're using Steam or similar gaming services, you're probably dedicating less bandwidth to VOIP than if you were using third-party software. That's because third-party software requires a dedicated line outside of your gaming just for chatting, compared to in-game VOIP which just requires one line into their servers.

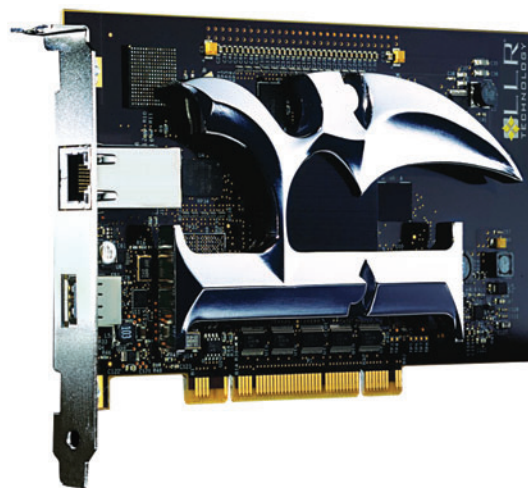
If you're experiencing connection hiccups, one of the things Alienware recommends is a gaming network card from Killer (www.killernic.com). Not only will this free up all connectivity duties from your CPU and system memory, but it maintains a smoother connection with fewer interruptions. You get smoother game play plus a nice advantage over your opponents in connecting to the game servers.

q. I'm close to a new round of upgrades, but I think I can milk my current PC for another few months. I just need to dial down a couple of options. What graphics options are the most demanding on hardware between MSAA, anisotropic filtering, and texture resolution? Also: are the very latest DX10 graphics cards better at anti-aliasing?

Jerry, BC.

Alienware: If we had to list while features we would sacrifice, in order from first to last, it would be anisotropic filtering, then anti-aliasing and finally texture resolution. Texture resolution is the one we try to keep cranked as high as possible since, above any other feature, it determines what the game looks like and how detailed the graphics you're looking at are. As far as anti-aliasing goes, it's a bit of a double edged sword in that, yes, anti-aliasing does improve with every new

"We suggest cranking up the texture resolution, toning down the anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering..."



generation of graphics cards, and cards that support DirectX 10 will provide higher anti-aliasing capabilities than cards just supporting DirectX 9, but it will still cost you in terms of system resources.

If you want to bump anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering to the max, you're going to put additional strain on the video card and your frame rate will take a hit. How much depends on a number of factors, not the least of which is what game you're playing. A game like Far Cry 2 is more resource-intensive than even a game like Call of Duty 4. You also have to consider what resolution you're gaming at; 1920 X 1200 is rougher on your card than 1280 X 1024. So, if you're looking for something to hold you over until your next upgrade, we suggest cranking up the texture resolution, toning down the anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering and then making tweaks based on in-game performance.



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts, regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bit rates and firewalls, send it along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free one-year subscription, so don't be shy!

Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest products.

Play Online

03_09

Star Trek Online hits warp speed

Star Trek is cool again, thanks in no small part to Hollywood demi-god J.J. Abrams' upcoming contemporized Star Trek film. Hardcore Trekkies are already well aware of Cryptic's Star Trek Online game (introduced by Spock himself at last year's Star Trek Convention in Vegas), and the mainstream draw of the new film has provided a healthy boost to the ambitious space MMO's profile, allowing Cryptic to expand the team and ramp-up development.

Unlike the movie, Star Trek Online isn't a re-mixing of James Tiberius Kirk-era Star Trek. Picking up 30 years after Star Trek Nemesis and bolstered by extensive lore from official novels and comics, the game's 2409 setting is essentially the interactive continuance of modern era Star Trek. Cryptic is flanked by franchise lore, diving into the vibrant mythology, cultures, societies and conflict that the installed fan base knows and adores. Here's your opportunity to experience races like the Breen, Ferengi, Klingons, Andorians and Bolians, captain your own Federation starship, and fight against Borg cubes alongside famous vessels like the USS Excalibur.

Star Trek Online looks to one-up its space MMO competition by offering a full avatar-based ground game, where captains can beam down to planets and board other ships with a crew of customizable NPC red shirts, or team up with other player captains and their away teams. Expect all manner of ship-to-ship and

character-based instances and open PvP challenges, and guilds (called Fleets here) can fully fund their own space stations and shipyards through a wide open galactic economy.

Star Trek Online is not, however, pigeon-holed into neat little packages of instances, fetch quests and crafting. True to the spirit of the franchise, exploration is the ultimate goal. Beyond richly detailed known quadrants of Star Trek space, Cryptic has devised an infinite galaxy and planet creator. You could be the first to stumble upon a pre-warp civilization, eventually welcoming a member of this new species into your bridge crew as a trusted security, science or navigation officer. Such is the scope of STO.



Steamspotting

Zombie exploitation nerfed, TF 2 Scout love imminent

Many exploits in Left 4 Dead recently experienced a sweeping, clinical removal by Valve via two powerful patches on Steam. No more leaping across rooftops or bunny-hopping barriers to skip zombie horde events, no more double speed melee by quickly switching weapons, and everyone's favorite Tank-avoiding

perch on the rooftop finale (a.k.a. Cheese Ledge) is just a memory. Valve is preparing a slew of new campaigns to reinvigorate L4D, welcome additions for all exploiters of the Infected.

In Team Fortress 2 news, at least one new class and two new gameplay modes are in the pipeline, and the brash and speedy Scout class is about to receive a full compliment of achievements and unlockable item upgrades. The new Scout gear will purportedly lend the bat-toting maniac greater versatility/survivability in all map modes.



BattleForge

graduates combat testing

After an extended multiplayer beta, during which EA's Phenomic Studio worked with the community to polish every aspect—from match-making to unit balance—of its impressive 12-player cooperative and competitive modes, BattleForge is now ready for mass consumption. Both hardcore RTS players and strategy-RPG lovers may find enjoyment in BattleForge, with its unique merger of collectible card battle tactics and explosive fantasy RTS warfare.



March 2009

Top-Selling PC Titles December 2008

01	World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King	Blizzard
02	The Sims 2 Double Deluxe	EA Maxis
03	Spore	EA
04	The Sims 2: Apartment Life Expansion Pack	EA Maxis
05	Call Of Duty: World At War	Treyarch
06	Left 4 Dead	Valve
07	Fallout 3	Bethesda
08	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Blizzard
09	World Of Warcraft	Blizzard
10	The Sims 2: Mansion & Garden Stuff Expansion	EA Maxis



World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King

Spore



OCZ Discusses Solid State Drives and Why They Are the Next Big Thing

You may have heard of them; you may know a thing or two about them...they're solid state drives and they mean business when it comes to a faster, more energy efficient system. Whether you game on a notebook or desktop, solid state drives are the next generation of mass storage.

OCZ has quickly become the head honcho in this exciting field. Attributable to not only supreme performance, OCZ SSD popularity has taken the industry by storm with their unparalleled affordability.

OCZ VP of Technology Development, Dr. Michael Schuette, takes a moment to go into depth about why SSDs are coming to a PC near you.



What is a Solid State Drive? How does it differ from a conventional hard drive (architecture-wise)?

A Solid State Drive or SSD is a mass storage device using the same interface (nowadays mostly SATA) as a hard disk drive (HDD). However, whereas a HDD uses rotating platters and a read/write head, SSDs use NAND Flash memory chips to store information similar to the way your USB flash drive does. The main consequential differences are:

- 1) There is no motor to rotate the platters. SSDs use much less power and are virtually silent!
- 2) There is no mechanical actuator that can be damaged by shock or vibration. SSDs are much more resilient to accidents like dropping or bumping.
- 3) There are no rotational and seek delays. SSD drives access data up to a thousand times faster than HDDs.

How will it benefit my computing experience?

This is something you have to experience to believe, but essentially every computer becomes tangibly faster and more responsive. Files open in a snap, games load more quickly! Especially with multiple files open, there is no lag compared to what you would experience if the HDD would try to write several files at the same time to different

locations. With an SSD, all of these things happen instantaneously and that really streamlines the computing experience.

Why do they cost so much more than hard drives (price-per-gigabyte- speaking)?

Flash memory chips are more expensive than magnetic platters and especially with the latest advancements in platter geometry including vertical platters, the storage capacity of HDDs has increased dramatically, notably in the last 3 years. Because the base price per drive has remained constant or even dropped, that means that the price per GB has decreased dramatically. Only 10 years ago, a 2GB HDD cost approximately \$200, and now you can get 1 TB for approximately \$100. In other words, it is not that the SSDs are so expensive; it is that HDD storage price has decreased by a factor of 1000 over the last 10 years. SSDs are following the same trend, but they are just a little further behind with respect to the price/capacity ratio.

Why is OCZ currently considered a pioneer in this arena?

In addition to pushing the performance to the limit, OCZ is the first company to make affordable SSDs available to the everyday computer user.

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2008 Anime Year In Review

SPECIAL TRANSITION EDITION!

words Dave Halverson / Danica Davidson

We all knew that the anime industry was due for a major wedgie—just too many shows and not enough suit intervention, but nobody could have predicted the ceiling-dropping out crapblizzard that nearly wiped the industry and anime as we know off the face of the western hemisphere. ADV said sayonara, Geneon bid us farewell, and Bandai retreated and pulled out most of their troops. If not for FUNimation's quick response to the industry-wide 911 call and subsequent multiple-series bailout (without Govt. Assistance) we might all be in therapy for anime withdrawal or Non-Celebrity Anime Rehab if VH1 had anything to say about it. And since Dragon Ball Z is what put FUNimation on the map, leading to the Navarre Corporation's acquisition in 2005...yes it's true...we owe it all to Dragon Ball Z. And so with a mighty Kamehameha! FUNimation and Dragon Ball Z we salute you! Now free Sergeant Frog or else!

And the 10 Best anime of 2008 are ...

Claymore

FUNIMATION

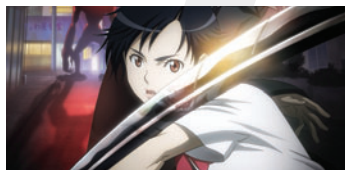


What it's about: Gruesome monsters called Yomas enjoy the equally gruesome task of feasting on humans in a pseudo-Medieval world. The only hope for humans would be the Claymore, female fighters who are half Yoma and half human themselves. But if they're part Yoma, can they really be trusted to help out the humans? Clare, the Claymore called upon, doesn't exactly strike anyone as friendly.

Why it's great: This anime is a slick, edgy horror with plenty of fantasy mixed in. Clare is a sort of punky, glacial, anime version of Joan of Arc. Her first impression on people may not lead anyone to consider her amiable, but she knows how to get the job done. The mystery of Clare herself is enough to put this anime in your must-watch pile.

Blood+

SONY PICTURES TV INT.



What it's about: Blood + started its life in the 2000 movie Blood: The Last Vampire. While both starred a dark-haired girl named Saya, she got a makeover for the 50-episode series. Some plot details changed, as well as her looks. Saya tries to live a normal life, only to have pesky (not to mention deadly) creatures like Chiropterans show up and just beg for her to finish them off with her sword.

Why it's great: Saya was so good she has to get her own series. She may look like an ordinary schoolgirl, but she knows how to battle against the creepiest of demons. And while this anime deals with vampires, like many others, it brings in a whole new universe with beings like Queens and Chevaliers.

Gurren Lagann

BANDAI ENTERTAINMENT

What it's about: In the mysterious future humans are forced to live underground. This begins to change when local gang leader Kamina convinces master driller and all-around wuss Simon to use his newly discovered drill to break through to the surface world. Things take a dramatic turn when worlds collide after which Simon and Kamina are joined by the crazy/sexy cannon toting Yoko and realize that they'll have to fight to stay above ground.

Why it's great: Gurren Lagann proved itself to be popular on the late night block of the SciFi Channel's AniMonday and it's easy to see why from the first dazzling frame. Gurren Lagann falls firmly under the description of "mecha" anime. However, Gainax (Evangelion, FLCL) make it about a lot more than a few fighting robots. Major plot twists and way-over-the-top characters and especially battles abound, and just try to take your eyes off of it.

Darker Than Black

FUNIMATION



What it's about: Once again anime is reaching into the future, and the future is bleak. Some people are now allowed—in fact, entitled—to kill others without mercy. Hei, the main character, is a killer himself, but he also has a caring side, considering how he's searching for his long lost sister. Now that's brotherly love. There are people who don't like what Hei's doing and are determined to stop him, complicating matters. Who's good and who's bad here?

Why it's great: What is darker than black? Of course, it could be a pun, seeing how the main character Hei's name literally means "black." Darker Than Black is definitely dark, but that can be a very good thing, especially when you want a moody anime.



xxxHolic

FUNIMATION



What it's about: xxxHolic (the xxx's are silent) is all about a superbly gangly and easily frustrated boy named Watanuki who one day stumbles upon a witch and her two very giggly sidekicks. Since Watanuki is used to seeing—and being dragged down by—otherworldly spirits, this can only be seen as a step-up. Yuko the witch can grant wishes, but you better believe there's going to be a cost in return.

Why it's great: Come on, it's based on a manga by CLAMP. CLAMP is a revered name in the world of manga. Furthermore, there's no resisting that witch Yuko, who's oh-so-wise and knows how to get what she wants. Don't forget that 2008 also released a double feature movie of xxxHolic and Tsubasa, which has the two films linking plots at points of the story.

Ghost Hunt

FUNIMATION



What it's about: Ghost Hunt starts with girls sharing ghost stories, and it keeps going from there. Mai is forced to help out a fellow student who investigates the paranormal and insists Mai has ESP. Any doubters may soon find themselves converted—or at least converted in the world of anime, where anything strange can and will happen. And while Mai doesn't think much at first of her fellow student, she might soon believe what he's been telling her, and more.

Why it's great: The show begins on a creepy note. For those who like their anime scary and atmospheric (without getting downright terrifying) they can find an enjoyable and spine-tingling series right here. It's also for anyone who likes their extra sensory stuff, as Mai is even able to have "out of body" experiences and prophesy through her dreams.

Batman Gotham Knight

WARNER BROS. HOME VIDEO



What it's about: This collection of six little movies—Have I Got a Story For You, Crossfire, Field Test, In Darkness Dwells, Working Through Pain, Deadshot—gives the American Batman an anime edge. It isn't fully American or fully Japanese, as people from both countries were involved in the production. You can think of it as the best minds of both places coming together, bringing an anthology for both Batman fans and Batman newbies.

Why it's great: In a year where The Dark Knight reined, we have to bring up this animated Batman. Six different directors from Japan worked on this, and while it may not have Heath Ledger, it still ought to wow fans for its stories and colorful, dark animation.

To be continued on page 78

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Appleseed Ex Machina

WARNER HOME VIDEO

What it's about: Appleseed predicts World War III to happen by the year 2135 and to kill off much of the globe's human population. You can't have a future sci-fi movie without artificial intelligence, your fair share of robots, and of course action and the Director/Producer team of Shinji Aramaki and John Woo do not disappoint. Brace yourself for a fair amount of drama as well—we swear.

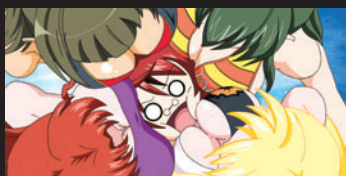
Why it's great: If you liked 2004's Appleseed movie, you have to pick up this sequel. While the overall design does have an anime-look, the CGI gives it a very different feel from the Shirow manga or traditional animation. However, Appleseed gets a pass for sticking close to the Shirow formula and select costume designs by Italian fashion mogul Miuccia Prada. While a name like "Appleseed" might not sound very bad-ass, this anime really, really is.



BEST FAN SERVICE

Negima!
-Spring Summer Special- OVA

Talk about fan service with a smile; Negima Spring Summer Special is pure side story and practically wall-to-wall promiscuity, with an emphasis on the visual.



BEST OF THE WEST

Dead Space: Downfall

In space no one can hear you wet yourself.



BEST SERIES CONTINUED FROM 2007

Death Note



Black Lagoon: Second Barrage
RUNNER UP

Death Note is already a classic and Black Lagoon, thanks to the ultimate girl with guns Revy, is an action packed force of nature.



The Girl Who Leapt Through Time

BANDAI ENTERTAINMENT



What it's about: After a train wreck almost kills her, Makoto discovers she has the enviable talent of being able to move about in time. So she does what any high school student would do: uses this sacred power to ace tests and enjoy more karaoke. Unfortunately, this careless attitude toward her power begins to impact others in less than positive ways, like when avoiding an awkward phone call leads to a fatal accident for two friends.

Why it's great: The whole idea of it is fun, but also intelligent and wise. It was directed by Mamoru Hosoda, who was involved with Miyazaki's Howl's Moving Castle. The Girl Who Leapt Through Time is as well-made as it is clever, receiving rave reviews in Japan and getting awards from film festivals around the globe.

BEST NEW CHARACTER FEMALE (TIE)

Yoko Littner

-GURREN LAGANN

Clare

-CLAYMORE

One is wild, one reserved. One shoots first and doesn't need to ask questions, the other waits for the perfect time to strike. One is an exhibitionist and one is a cold fish. We choose both.



Black Blood Brothers

FUNIMATION



What it's about: Jiro, a vampire lacking fashion sense (take a look at that floppy red hat) has to do more than save himself from the fashion police: he has to save the vampires in the Special Zone. It's a twist from the typical plot line where vampires are the ones doing the hunting. With his little brother Kotaro in tow, Jiro has to face enemies old and new and show his powers as the legendary Silver Blade fighter. More than a few plots are afoot, and they harken back to old feuds and battles.

Why it's great: While vampires remain ever-popular in anime, Black Blood Brothers keeps itself above clichés with its likeable and winning cast of characters. Vampires are featured in anime for the very reason they continue to fascinate, and our sharp-toothed family fascinates as much as it entertains. There's both blood and humor here. Besides, who can resist a little blond vampire tyke like Kotaro?

BEST MOVIE

The Girl Who Leapt Through Time

A story that leaps off the screen and holds you tight from beginning to end.



BEST COMEDY

Wallflower
Shin Chan RUNNER UP

3 beautiful boys, one disgusting girl and to pay rent or not to pay rent?

BEST SERIES DEBUTS

Claymore, Gurren Lagann,
Darker Than Black

You-need-all-three



AND WE CAN'T WAIT FOR (MOST WANTED '09)...

Afro Samurai: Resurrection (it's here!), Sgt. Frog, Ponyo, Baccano!, Shigurui, Clannad, Gunslinger Girl 2 and Monster...(so far).

GUNSLINGER GIRL 2



SERGEANT FROG



AFRO SAMURAI RESURRECTION

BACCANO



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Fright Rags

Lo some 2009, marks the year of the Ox, but to the disturbed, bruised and bloodied masses, 2009 marks the return of the horror genre to the silver screen. Get a severed leg up on the masses with these killer shirts and zippered hoodies from Fright-Rags.com. -DB



Halo 3 Master Chief Steel Bust Variant

Limited to only 600 pieces, the Master Chief Steel Spartan exclusive Halo 3 Mini Bust from Gentle Giant stands 7.5 inches tall and includes different arms and weapons allowing various poses. What it can guarantee: that your Xbox 360 will look pretty bad ass with Master Chief displayed next to it. What it can't guarantee: that your 360 doesn't fall victim to the dreadful Red Ring of Death. Available exclusively through Action Figure Xpress for a mere \$54.99. -DB



Akira

Yamato USA \$98.00 yamatotoyusa.com

Presin quality figures at PVC prices. That's the idea behind Yamato USA's Fantasy Figure Gallery, beginning with the beautiful Akira, inspired by the work of renowned artist Dorian The Cleavenger and sculpted by Plant-jzero Moekichi. The Fantasy Figure Gallery is an East meets West collaboration combining the talents of Asia's leading sculptors with Europe and the Americas' legendary fantasy artists. Akira stands 10.5 inches tall (15 with her ornamental staff) on a themed base, is constructed of over 100 individual pieces and features over 400 paint applications. I'm staring at her in the PVC right now and, mission accomplished. She looks positively resonating. Next up: Medusa's Gaze in March. -DH



THE GIRLS ARE HERE!

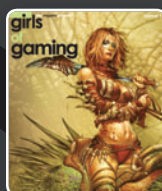
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Arcade Fightstick Tournament Edition by MadCatz

PS3: \$299.99

Bolting Screws! That's the first thing I have to say about this succulent joystick. It has bolting screws on the bottom so you can secure it to a larger base. Bolting screws. What does this mean, reader? It means that violent Street Fighters don't have to worry about their stick shimmying during a match. Bolting screws!

See, I have a bit of a problem when it comes to fighting games. I, uh, tend to get a little aggressive with my controllers. Finally, a stock remedy for the situation.

This is an extraordinary piece of equipment. Fanatics will be satisfied with the purchase, as the entire body and stick is crafted from Sanwa parts and feature buttons that can be swapped with (relative) ease. It's heavy, it's sturdy; it feels real.

The Xbox/PS button can be locked, which means players don't have to worry about accidentally pulling up menus while they're playing, and the Start and Select buttons are mounted to the side of the base for the same reason. Each button has individual turbo toggles, a must for cheaters.

Even the packaging demonstrates an unusual attention to detail. Opening the case feels like a special event, and the inside flap sports a delightful linen paper certificate that applauds buyers for their taste. If you're the kind of person who waited to buy a 360 until backwards compatibility was offered for Street Fighter III, then this might be the stick for you. If you drove or biked to an arcade when Super Turbo was released, then this is something you may need. If you know the difference between A-ism, V-ism, and X-ism, then go reserve one already! -HAC



SFIV FightStick

PS3: \$69.99, wired / Xbox 360: \$79.99, wired

I'm sure there are many people like me out there; I've been wanting a joystick for quite some time now, but never knew what to buy, and with money being of enough importance to me to not throw it away on a stick I may end up hating, my solution has simply been not to buy one period.

The product that MadCatz has given us in the SFIV FightStick is, I can honestly say, something that I would purchase, and that comes thanks to two reasons. While you aren't going to get arcade-caliber hardware for this price no matter what you buy, the feel of the stock stick and buttons here was far more satisfying and dependable to me than previous offerings I've tested in the same price class. The joystick itself failed me in the one game I really wanted it to perform for—Pac-Man CE—but almost everything else I tried gave me enough confidence in the FightStick that I could seriously consider it as a controller alternative.

It is the fact that those stock parts can easily be replaced, however, that makes the FightStick a viable purchase. It can be hard for many of us to afford or justify the purchase of a full arcade-quality stick, and that piece of mind knowing that if you aren't fully satisfied with what you get, you can always make it better down the road, is a factor that can't be emphasized enough. -ELP



SFIV FightPad

PS3: \$39.99, wireless / Xbox 360: \$39.99, wired

I think I will get no argument from anyone out there reading this that Sega's Japanese-style Saturn pad was as close to a perfect input device for 2D gaming as the world has ever seen. As well, I think nobody will deny that that very controller was clearly the inspiration for the MadCatz FightPad.

To that degree, the FightPad is better than I expected it to be, and not as good as I hoped it would be.

The d-pad is of course one of the most important variables (especially for the Xbox 360 version, where a good d-pad is desperately needed), and thankfully it is the type that feels loose and floaty physically but is quite precise in terms of actual

gameplay. The d-pad performed extremely well in all of the fighters I tested, and is also a great all-purpose device, but I did notice that extra effort was needed for those games that require the holding of diagonals. Button layout is, as one would expect, exactly how it should be, and though crazy noisy when pressed, the buttons themselves left nothing to be desired.

My one big complaint with the FightPad—and this will no doubt be a very subjective opinion—is that in comparison to the svelte and sophisticated stylings of Sega's beloved controller, the FightPad's body feels, to me, awkward and bulky. This annoyance doesn't stop me from thinking the FightPad is a very respectable attempt to give us a third-party controller worth picking up, it just makes me curse the huge-handed person who approved the design. -ELP

While both versions of the SFIV FightSticks allow for end-user modification and customization, MadCatz neither encourages nor condones such actions. Modding the parts on either FightStick will immediately invalidate the warranty on said product.

Either you get it.

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Yeti

Studio: Genius Entertainment | Genre: Horror | Rated: NR | Available: January 13, 2009

As mystery apes at the movies go, the Yeti is a distant second to its North American cousin, Bigfoot; you've got *Snow Beast*, the Japanese *Half Human*, *The Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas*, and the amazing *Shriek of the Mutilated*—and that's pretty much it. None of these are going to improve the monster's standing at the box office, and neither is *Yeti*, its latest bid for big-screen stardom. But while this Sci-Fi Channel original is at least ten different kinds of terrible, it's never dull; the plot, which pits a downed planeload of footballers against the man-eating creature, allows for both absurd gore effects, including a man beaten with his own severed leg (a highlight on *The Soup* for weeks) as well as hilarious, show-stopping dialogue about the pros and cons of cannibalism. You could do worse—not by much, but you could. **Paul Gaita**



Babylon AD

Studio: 20th Century Fox | Genre: Science Fiction | Rated: NR | Available: January 2009

Director Mathieu Kassovitz openly criticized the production, Vin Diesel joked that he wasn't sure he was still in the movie after it went through a sharp cut, my girlfriend likened the plot to swiss cheese, and the tepid, disjointed third act ends on a dead note, but hey, *Babylon AD* is still juicy science fiction for those willing to bite. I kind of like it. The movie frames Vin Diesel as a mercenary type, hired to protect a mysterious young girl from an Eastern Europe monastery as they run, shoot, chase, and snowmobile their way across slick, big action sets on their trip to America. The fate of this post-apocalyptic world, it would seem, resides in the success of Vin removing the occasional shrapnel from his body while playing the tough-guy act with everyone he meets. In all its messy, visually appealing glory, *Babylon AD* toys with familiar sci-fi themes—religion, pestilence, saviors, evilness—with just enough wonderment to make it work. Good fodder for the Blu-Ray/forgiving sci-fi fans. **Paul Gaita**

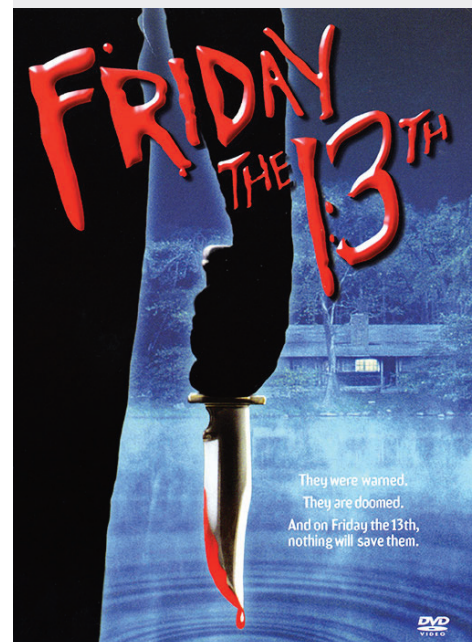


"Babylon AD toys with familiar sci-fi themes ... with just enough wonderment to make it work"

The Enforcer

Studio: Weinstein Company / Genius Products | Genre: Action / Martial Arts | Rated: NR | Available: February 10, 2009

The original title for this 1995 Hong Kong action-drama is *My Father's a Hero*, which is a more accurate description for the film's tone than its tough guy moniker. Jet Li is a cop who juggles his undercover investigation of a local mobster with tending to a sickly wife and his adoring son. Both aspects of his life eventually cross paths, which can only be sorted out by liberal amounts of ass-kicking. Li fans used to his stoic screen persona may find the film's melodramatic elements difficult to swallow, but he rises to the occasion in the action sequences, for which he is well-matched by the under-appreciated Anita Mui. The DVD includes commentary and interviews with the cast (though not Li or Mui). **Paul Gaita**



Friday the 13th—Uncut

Studio: Paramount Home Video | Genre: Horror | Rated: NR | Available: February 3, 2009

Dissecting the popularity of *Friday the 13th* is like weighing the merits of a chili cheeseburger—it delivers exactly what you hope from it, nothing more, nothing less. If a reason has to be given for the film's pop culture immortality, the answer boils down to efficiency. Director Sean Cunningham (*Last House on the Left*) wastes no time in cranking up the movie's machinery—the plot, borrowed largely from Mario Bava's *Bay of Blood*, introduces its gaggle of camp counselors (among them Kevin Bacon), launches its central conceit (a former camper haunts the nearby woods), and away we go into a series of murder set pieces highlighted by Tom Savini's jaw-dropping effects. Add a jarring twist ending, Harry Manfredini's memorable score, and bake for 80 minutes. There's very little wasted space in *Friday the 13th*—characters and dialogue are kept to a minimum so as to make room for the film's true focus: the stalk and slash. It's a surprisingly simple formula, but one that seems to have been lost on the film's countless sequels (save Part 2) and its countless rip-offs (the jury is still out on the upcoming remake).

Paramount's DVD is uncut, which translates into slightly longer murder scenes; the gaggle of making-of featurettes are largely for first-time viewers. The equally effective *Friday the 13th Part 2* and *Part 3* (in 3-D) are also newly available, though only in their original theatrical versions; hardcore Friday fans should also check out the double-disc documentary *His Name Was Jason* from Anchor Bay. **Paul Gaita**

"...characters and dialogue are kept to a minimum so as to make room for the film's true focus: the stalk and slash."

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The screenshot shows the play.online website layout. At the top is the 'play.online' logo with the tagline 'the official website of play magazine'. To the right is the 'playforums' logo with the tagline 'don't just play... connect'. Below the logos is a navigation bar with links: home, games, anime, japan, media, contests, staff, about us, contact us, subscribe, newsletter.

The main content area is divided into several sections:

- play.news**: A section for weekly newsletters with a 'Subscribe now!' button.
- shop.digital**: A section for digital content, including back issues, digital content, and featured items like 'SPACE SIEGE'.
- Capcom Reveals Four New Characters**: A featured article with a large image of a character and a 'feature story' label.
- The Wii-kly Update: November 3rd**: A section for game updates.
- Eleven Games for Halloween**: A section for Halloween-themed game recommendations.
- Princess and Knight**: A section for game reviews.
- Halloween Anime Recommendations**: A section for anime recommendations.
- girls of gaming**: A section for gaming-related content, including a 'special digital bundle!' and 'girls of gaming 5.5'.
- recent content**: A section for recent content, including 'Pete Smith', 'LittleBigPlanet', 'Star Ocean', and 'Legacy of Ys'.

At the bottom, there is a 'play.polls' section with a poll about the 'Wrath of the Lich King' and a 'play.contests' section with a 'Sorry!' message and a 'See More Contests' button.

Genso Suikoden Series

An army of highs and lows

words Casey Loe

I still remember the day a just-released import copy of Suikoden landed on my desk at GameFan Magazine. No one had been expecting much from the title; Konami hadn't made a good RPG in years, and its flat 2D graphics suggested that the game had originally been intended for a Super Famicom release. But by the end of the day, I was a believer.

From its very first release, the Suikoden series has ably mixed JRPG charm, accessibility and artistry with the deeper characters, twistier plots and stronger writing of western fantasy novels. Very loosely based on a centuries-old Chinese novel in which 108 warriors rebel against a corrupt government, all Suikoden games have a theme of political rebellion and a cast of 108 heroes to recruit. But despite the size of the cast, the characters are typically well-developed and the series packs a rare emotional punch whenever heroes die or betray your cause.

The original Suikoden has already been re-released on PSN, and I highly recommend it to any RPG fan who missed it the first time around. Suikoden set the template for the series, pioneered a new fast-paced battle system in which all characters attack at once, and offered a spectacular soundtrack that was collaborated upon by virtually all of Konami's top composers. While its colorful 2D graphics didn't pack much of an impact at the time, they've aged much better than the PS1's early 3D efforts. While the game has been harshly criticized

for its length (around 15 hours) and lack of difficulty, such flaws have since become strengths in my eyes; the novelty of playing vintage RPGs rarely lasts for their full 30-40 hour lengths, so a title as short and sweet as the original Suikoden is a delight to replay. And at a mere \$6, you'll certainly get your money's worth.

Suikoden II should also be out on PSN by the time you read this. Its epic quest certainly isn't short, and its darkly tragic storyline is hardly sweet, but the game is considered by most fans to be the finest title in the series. It ably demonstrates the grand scope of series-creator Yoshitaka Murayama's world, and his skill at writing emotionally-charged plot points, sympathetic antagonists, and memorable supporting characters. It's also one of the few direct JRPG sequels, set in a new kingdom but featuring plenty of returning characters and plot threads from the original title.

After hitting new heights with its first sequel, Suikoden began to lose its way. Series-creator Yoshitaka Murayama quit, reportedly on bad terms, in the middle of Suikoden III development. While that game had most aspects of the strong narrative that the series was famous for, a misguided overhaul of the battle system made the previously fast-paced series into something of a chore, and the story didn't come together as tightly as in previous installments. In the hands of a new writer and director, Suikoden IV felt more like a spin-off than a sequel, with a more limited world and many controversial

mechanical changes. It wasn't until Suikoden V that the ever-shifting Suikoden development team managed to recapture the strong narratives of the first two chapters, and roll back some of the less successful changes to the play mechanics. The new Suikoden Tierkreis for the Nintendo DS looks promising, but is far removed from the continuity of the numbered titles, and has a more fantastical focus that may not satisfy fans waiting for a true numbered installment. With much of the series' development talent tied up on the DS, it isn't clear when we'll see a proper Suikoden VI, but the respectable Japanese sales of Suikoden Tierkreis will hopefully pave the way for a resurgence of the series.

The early chapters of the Suikoden series had small print runs, and Konami has never localized the PSP re-release of the first two games. That's led to exorbitant prices for copies of Suikoden I and II, and made it virtually impossible for new fans to get into the series. Now that you can play the excellent early installments for a mere \$6, there are no more reasons to ignore this uniquely fascinating series. Get thee to PSN! A rare JRPG world free of black-and-white villains, effeminate emo heroes, masturbation-bait heroines, and ludicrous universe-in-peril plots is waiting for you!



The Sounds of Suikoden

With continuous releases of Original Soundtracks, Piano Collections, Vocal Collections, Asian Collections, Orgel Collections, and orchestrated arrangements, the [Genso] Suikoden series has a soundtrack-to-game ratio that few franchises can match. None of these fine CDs have been released domestically (get on iTunes already, Konami!), but all are available at online retailers like CDJapan and Gamemusic.com. Here are a few of our favorites:



Genso Suikoden Original Soundtrack
Composed by an all-star team of composers lead by the legendary Tappy and Miki-Chang, the original soundtrack to Suikoden I ("Genso Suikoden" in Japan) has never been topped.



Genso Suikoden Music Collection
Produced by...
Of all the series-wide CDs, these studio-recorded orchestral arrangements are the best. There are two versions, "Produced by Hiroyuki Nanba" and "Produced by Kentaro Haneda," and many a pistol duel has been waged over which is better. (I'm a Hiroyuki Nanba man, personally.)



Genso Suikoden Celtic Collection
Celtic arrangements have become something a cliché, but these arrangements fit the already Celtic-inspired Suikoden soundtracks perfectly. Reasonable minds may differ, but I say there's no topping the first collection (of three).



Genso Suikogaiden: Knights of Harmonia Vol. 1
No matter how much you enjoy the music in Suikoden II, don't buy the original soundtrack. Instead, pick up the soundtrack to Knights of Harmonia, a Suikoden II digital-comic side story released only in Japan. It offers the same compositions, but with far superior sample quality.

BACK OF THE BOOK

03.09 HEATHER CAMPBELL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Games Magazines, Man. Like, Old Ones.

"I'll tell you what. The sticker-makers are sadists, man. They hate kids."

Let's talk about games magazines.

I had this drawer, right? It was at the bottom of one of my pa's old filing cabinets. I mean, it was my cabinet and everything, but it used to be my dad's. There were stickers on the front -- some, like, Ninja Turtles stickers and maybe some Biker Mice from Mars stickers. Think I had a baseball sticker, too. You know, one of those stickers that you get when you're a kid and you think, "Where the hell am I going to put a sticker of a baseball?" and then you see a spot on a cabinet and say to yourself, "I guess I'll just put it here."

Then you feel like an idiot, staring at that round baseball all the time. You try and tear it off, but it rips a little and leaves the paper residue underneath, so you have to Scotch Tape it back to itself, 'cause the worst thing in the world would be having a three-quarters baseball sticker stuck to your drawer.

So, there's a sticker of a baseball and now it's *taped* to your drawer and it really looks like you *wanted* it there. Looks like you wanted it there *so much*, you taped it to itself to make sure it didn't go anywhere. Your friends think, "Lotto, man. I guess Lotto loves baseballs."

I hated stickers like that when I was a kid. Remember those machines at the fronts of grocery stores, near the Skill-Kranes? The kind that had sheets of stickers for fifty cents? There'd be an **awesome sticker of a skull riding a surfboard** on the front, and you'd beg your folks for some money so you could get that skull on a surfboard ... and you'd drop in your change all eager-like, and twist the handle and get a sticker of a *tree*.

What's anyone gonna do with a sticker of a tree? Kids are crazy; we gotta stick a sticker to something, so it goes next to the baseball.

I'll tell you what. The sticker-makers are sadists, man. They hate kids.

What are we talking about? Oh right. Games magazines.

Anyway, so I had this drawer, right? It was full of gaming magazines. It was the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet because if it were the top, it would tip the whole thing over when you pulled it out. There were three or four subscriptions in that drawer. One was Nintendo Power (back when Nester cartoons were running, and the cover featured a Mario made out of clay), one was Next Generation (thick mag with cardboard paper that ran for like, all of 1996 or something), one was Diehard Gamefan (lol, amirite), and the last one was EGM.

EGM was pretty sweet. I haven't read an

issue for a long time, but when I was a little kid (we're talking right around the time that Hostess was making green Pudding Pies), I got that magazine in the post every month and read it before the rest of the mail hit the floor. It was hip stuff. First issue I received had a robot or something on the cover. Old EGM was so ice cold that it didn't even need to *feature* a game on the front, just some picture of a machine. Or outer space.

Now, everyone read EGM for one thing: Quartermann. Sure, Sushi-X was pretty great, but Quartermann had him beat. They both had the same thing going for them -- anonymity -- but Quartermann told us stuff he wasn't supposed to. Made us feel like we were his buddy. Like he'd come out of the shadows and tell us who he was if we caught him at the right time. Sushi wouldn't do that. Sushi'd cut you in your sleep. With your *own* scissors. He was that kind of dude.

You know, I met Sushi once. No joke. It was an alley in San Diego, right after Comic-Con. Guy leans in real shady like, pulls down one of his eyes like that dude in Aliens, and says, "I'm Sushi-X." The wind killed a swan. Off in the distance was the sound of a car crash, followed by the unmistakable sigh of a broken heart. Sushi-X laughed.

Quartermann wouldn't laugh like that. He'd share a grilled cheese with you.

Problem is, Quartermann is like, the Internet, you know? Everyone is Quartermann now. That either sucks, or it's really awesome. Personally, I'd rather be a telepathic Frisbee, or a dog that wore sunglasses all the time. But being Quartermann is cool.

So, what I'm getting to here is that even though I didn't read EGM anymore, I'm going to miss it. It was a good mag; one of the first. It's like the ice cream shop that you didn't hit up anymore; when it closes, you can't stop thinking about waffle cones. If I wasn't a Vegan, man, I'd be eating a waffle cone right now, in EGM's honor. Instead, I've got a soy-cream milkshake and some Oreos. You know Oreos are Vegan, right?

EGM was a little piece of Famitsu right here. Getting different scores on games made the whole thing feel legit. I like what those guys over at Play do, all wordy and stuff (I'm a subscriber) but there's something to be said about getting a second opinion, you know?

When you go to the doctor and he tells you you've got a bag of pennies in your stomach, but you don't remember eating any bag of pennies, you go to another doctor. Then that

doctor says, "Yeah, that's a bag of pennies." And you're like, "Oh right, I forgot about that bet."

I liked those scores. I liked Quartermann. And I liked the stuff they used to do about Street Fighter II back in the day. I hear that EGM had some hard-core players in the office. (Gamefan, too.) For a while, EGM might as well have been called SFIGM.

And speaking of Street Fighter, man, anyone who's worth their weight in games knows that EGM pulled off the April Fool's prank ever. I was one of the kids who spent the whole summer of '92 trying to fight Shen Long. The only thing that's come close to that prank is Duke Nukem Forever. That's a pretty great prank, man. Can't believe people are still printing screen shots of that game.

I'm gonna miss EGM. I'm pouring a beer on the ground right now. I'll probably get in trouble, 'cause this is an Internet cafe. Wait, no, this is a Kinko's.

It's getting thin out there, people. The way I figure it, there's going to be just a few magazines left when it all comes down to ships and ceiling wax. The New Yorker will still be here, because everyone wants a copy of the New Yorker on their table when they're thirty. It's something we saw people do in a movie once, you know: Have the New Yorker on their table.

Maxim or Playboy will still be around, 'cause dudes have bathrooms.

And big ART magazines will probably stick around, because those ART people love paper.

The things that will keep regular magazines alive, though, will be the things that separate magazines from the Internet. Nobody likes to read long articles on the 'net, yet. People like to flip pages. As long as human beans don't get too hooked on CSI: American Idol, they're going to dig articles. Editorial matters, and so does silence. Man, that's what people will still be picking up magazines for. Not news. Opinions and words.

I'll keep picking up magazines because I dig the tangible, man. I might be a dying breed, but I like stuff in my hands. I've got a lot of pens, you know? I've got a few cereal boxes over here, too. Joysticks before D-Pads. Instruction manuals, can badges, and shoes with laces. These are the things that matter. Things we can touch.

Oh hell, I gotta go. They're kicking me out. Apparently, you can't bring beer into a Fed-Ex.

- Lotto, *The Hoodie-Wearing Gamer*

Blah, blah, blah



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